Beyond Picturing

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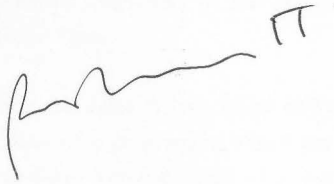
Abstract

Beyond Picturing is practice-led research that is aimed at determining whether horizontality can be deemed a medium in its own right, and, further, whether it can establish a new set of conventions, enabling a cross-cultural dialogue between peoples of this region—particularly Aboriginal people and those of European heritage. A study taking the form of a maximum of a 30,000 word research essay comprises the outcome of the theory component.

Declaration of Originality

I, Peter Adsett (date: 9/10/12), hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.



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In memory of Pitjantjatjara elder, Nganyinytja.

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Thank you to the Holmes à Court Collection for the kind permission to reproduce the images of Paddy Jaminji's paintings, and to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, to reproduce the images of Paddy Bedford's paintings.

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Introduction

A recent major exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia, entitled *Desert Country*, included a move by the curator, Nici Cumpston, of which few people understood the significance—either then or now. She placed a central desert acrylic painting on the floor, stating that because this was the original site of production, it should be displayed this way. While her statement regarding production is undeniably true, the move was naïve and fails to recognise the deep meaning embodied in a vertical, as opposed to horizontal, axis.

The first point to make about work made on a horizontal surface (a floor or table) is that the painter looks down, with their whole body connecting with the work. The distance that separates a painter from the easel or wall is removed. With no horizon, no trajectory for the eye to seek perspective, the surface of the painting becomes lowered, reduced to a work surface, a repository for materials that *read only as materials*. The horizontal process is one of making and responding to the supine position of the body, and the artwork produced becomes a residue of this process or action. The eye is no longer dominant as it was when the body was upright. In the latter position, the viewer cannot avoid sublimation—constructing an image. Work that is created horizontally operates differently on a viewer, so that even if hung vertically, its horizontal matrix is clearly recognisable. It has an internal logic that is not that of representation. What I have described can be called the 'conventions' of horizontality.

Everything we take for granted in a vertical work—that is to say, a perspective-based work—has been eliminated. In order to read the image, one must discern a figure against a ground. However, in Aboriginal paintings, those spatial distinctions are collapsed through horizontality. We might refer to this space as 'ground on ground'. All Aboriginal art contains symbols; however, in being read as figures, they are compromised by a ground that is equally activated. This is diametrically opposed to Western figurative art where the ground is neutral.

It appears to me that one cannot arrive at this recognition through the model of modernist abstraction. Although there may be a superficial resemblance, acrylic desert painting has little to do with modernist theory (flatness and the internalisation of the frame). In the work of Emily Kngwarreye, for example, there is no internal frame; rather, the design is restricted by the border. A Western abstract painter, such as Tony

Tuckson (or Jackson Pollock or Piet Mondrian), would regard the border as an integral element which helps determine the structure of the painting.

However, there is a body of knowledge that allows us to develop a language for this horizontal matrix: the 'formless'. This was first theorised by Georges Bataille in the 1920s, and analysed in the catalogue of an exhibition entitled *L'Informe* at the Pompidou Centre in 1996 by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. Their discussion of horizontality, a category of the formless, provides an alternative reading of crucial works of the last hundred years—works by Richard Serra, Robert Ryman, Jackson Pollock, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Morris, Jean Dubuffet, Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti, among them. This new reading places the emphasis on the operational aspect of the work—that is to say, how it affects the viewer (or, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty would say, its phenomenological address).

My focus on this alternative history of 20th Century and contemporary art means that this thesis ignores a comprehensive survey which would include all recent figurative art (whether or not painted on a horizontal matrix), and all so-called recent abstract painting like that of Brent Harris, John Nixon, Aida Tomescu (to name a sample from Australia). Their work, when not merely decorative, (that is having no underlying principle stemming from the conventions of Abstraction established by Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich et al) has no interest in the internal meaning of horizontality.

The reason that most contemporary abstract art is reduced to being merely decorative or in fact outright figurative is that artists have adopted the teleological view which holds that the underlying principles of abstraction have no longer relevance. Clearly a significant number of artists today, notably (Cy Twombly, Richard Serra and Robert Ryman) think differently.

When I first encountered the writings of Krauss and Bois, they articulated what I had been doing in my practice since the 1990s. At that time, in a series of works entitled *Snakes and Ladders*, I applied thin layers of paint on the ground. I have done so ever since—on the *ground*. Working horizontally, I know the field that inhabits the body. My body knows irresolvability.

This thesis, *Beyond Picturing*, posits the case that horizontality not only allows me, as a painter, to renew the premises of abstraction, but also establishes a new set of conventions. It also allows the art of Kngwarreye and Paddy Bedford to be read outside the parameters of modernist abstraction or representation. The term 'horizontality' will

be used herein to substitute the terms 'abstraction' and 'representation' when discussing the art of Kngwarreye and Bedford.

In the first chapter, I discuss the evolution of horizontality as a medium, indicating that artists have been aware of it and the axial shift it produces, since Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio at least. In many works by Caravaggio, the religious narrative is overlaid with deliberate implied movement of bodies between the upright and supine position. Furthermore, Caravaggio's works incorporate the space of the chapel and thus the worshipping viewer, whose posture is represented as if in a mirror by kneeling figures (*Madonna of Loreto*) or supplicant figures (*Conversion of St. Paul*).

In the case of Paul Cézanne in the modern era, the painting is constructed in a series of marks (*touches*) in such a way that the viewer is aware of a vertical slippage downwards to the floor—a space shared by the body of the viewer (Merleau-Ponty calls this the phenomenological vector)—through which we construct meaning. What Cézanne dropped on the floor was not picked up and used until the advent of Pollock, as I will demonstrate in depth through the study of *Full Fathom Five*.

Meanwhile, Cézanne's great student, Picasso, reinterpreted Cézanne's vertical drop in a series of townscapes done at Horta de Ebro in 1909. These combine a bird's eye perspective with that of an Albertian view. However, it is in the *papier collé* still lifes of 1912—such as *Still Life with a Bottle of Suze*—that the game is fully declared and he limits himself to the sign of horizontal flatness. The elements of collage are deliberately chosen as signs of horizontality: wallpaper, newspaper and labels. In general, things that are cut out are always horizontal. Moreover, the site of production for all these works was a table top, not an easel.

In the 1970s, when Leo Steinberg was writing on Picasso's cubist works, he referred to this horizontal surface in relation to Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*, as having a 'receptor surface'. The term 'flatbed' (the bed of a printing press) was used as a synonym. Rauschenberg expanded Picasso's vocabulary by using photographic material, postcards and other printed things, including fabric. Ultimately, he would dump anything onto the receptor surface that appeared on the workbench. Steinberg realised that the categories of abstraction and representation were of little use here: 'leaving the old stand-by criteria to rule an eroding plane'.[1] In other words, horizontality as a process had declassified the terms of abstraction and representation.

I turn then to a sculpture by Serra, in whose work horizontality was the syntax for the medium. The residue of the torn strips in *Tearing Lead*, for example, became an index

both to the horizontal field and the manual process. At the heart of this first chapter is a study of two key paintings of Pollock's drip period, inasmuch as his method of working came to epitomise the idea of horizontality as the internal logic of the work for artists such as Serra and Morris.

The second chapter focuses on the art of Kngwarreye, examining the issue of comparing her art to modernism. If one fails to discriminate between different forms of abstraction in twentieth century art, one might lump together such disparate figures as Kandinsky and Pollock, seeing in both a hidden image. More surprisingly, both have been compared to Kngwarreye. However, Kandinsky simplified nature into organic or geometric form, while Pollock never abstracted from nature, as he himself vehemently declared.

Kngwarreye's art is not representational in any Western sense of the term. She is, in fact, concerned with neither the non-mimetic aspects of Western abstraction nor the resemblance of form through perspectival representation. It is crucial with Kngwarreye to understand that the marks she made horizontally are a residue of a process and not ghost images of nature. In my study of Kngwarreye's painting, *Big Yam Dreaming*, I develop the argument that the horizontal support for practice generates its own set of conventions. That is to say, her art is a lesson to us to rethink abstraction—to see her painting as a theoretical object.

In the third chapter, I expand my discussion of the concept of horizontality, examining the paintings of Bedford, with an initial digression to the works of Paddy Jaminji and Rusty Peters. The Bedford painting *Red Pocket*, 2005 introduced tone and the illusion of depth. It is one of a group that unfortunately reintroduced image and verticality. For several years, Bedford lost sight of the medium of horizontality that had always supported his practice. Only in gouaches on paper and crescent board, which use deep blacks and reds, did the paint return to its materiality and become a residue of an event.

In my conclusion, I extend the implications of my observations on contemporary Aboriginal art to the issue of the influence of Western art advisors. This influence has been exerted since the 1970s, when Geoffrey Bardon gave schoolroom art materials to the elders at Papunya Tula. My interest then turns to the use of language and how this is articulated through process, and not through figuring or representation. I give direct accounts of my observations and experiences while working with Aboriginal artists, and these artists' responses to my practice. For both cultures, horizontality is understood as a site for process to be experienced.

To conclude, this thesis has provided a context for my own practice. I have argued over many years that the Aboriginal art movement in the late twentieth century has implications for non-Aboriginal artists. It is not a question of influence, but the differing structure of painting that enables a way forward in abstraction for Western art. I believe that horizontality enables a reinvention of the medium of painting by creating new conventions.

Chapter 1: Horizontality

This chapter will discuss the concept of horizontality as a *medium* and argue that it was a break from traditional painting—one that went beyond picturing. Pollock was not, as Clement Greenberg indicated, in a continual progression in painting from the Old Masters to Eduard Manet. Manet's break liberated the boundaries of representation so that the subject matter became painting, itself. That is, the material surface—that which I call the signifier (since painting is a language)—is not a transparent gateway to meaning behind it, but signifies in its own right. The function of modernist composition was to unify the surface, and Greenberg understood this as a progression towards the inherent flatness of the painting support. However, as Steinberg wrote in *Other Criteria*, a break occurred in the 1960s from 'nature to culture'. Steinberg used the term 'flatbed' to describe the horizontal work plate of a printing press. A shift from the vertical to the horizontal had been declared as a work surface—not one of vision (nature), but of process (culture).

How does lowering the canvas to the floor create a new medium and a new set of conventions to analyse and interpret art? How does horizontality, an operation in the 'formless',[2] become a foundation for a possible cross-cultural dialogue? I will argue and give examples to show that horizontality as a technical support for the medium strikes against the figure of painting, and that, as process, it repositions the viewer from the beholder of focused vision to one in which they can construct meaning through a phenomenological vector.

PA: *I remember looking back over my shoulder at Piltarti, Nganyinytja's waterhole, thinking 'this is not the site of a reflected surface, a mirror of our upright surrounds', when suddenly a serpent pierced the surface to reveal not the depths below but black as depth lying on its surface.*

Fig. 1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Narcissus*

In Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1596–97, oil on canvas, 44 x 36$^{1/4}$ inches, Palazzo Barbarini, Rome) (Fig. 1) the boy is bending over to see his reflected self in the water. It soon becomes clear that the mirror image of the boy—bounded in an oval shape rotating around a central point—is upright. We read this as such because the image also reflects the way we look. It is fixed and central and therefore reinforces the Gestalt experience of being an upright image, balanced, symmetrical and ultimately of good form.

David Levin described this condition of focused vision as being 'frontal ontology'.[3] It embraces a received history of perspectival representational art from the Old Masters to the present. As a consequence, one's viewing is continually being reaffirmed as upright and reflecting conventions of good form. I would argue that the centralisation of image, pointing back to us, is narcissistic. Like the boy, we are transfixed and seduced by the image of what we like to view (a psychological condition). No matter how determinedly one tries to penetrate the surface to depths below, the horizontal plane of Caravaggio's painting, the image, remains as one of an upright figure. It is vertical, beholden to the controlling gaze associated with good form. The medium of painting and its conventions of chiaroscuro, colour, line, perspective and composition are all used to reinforce this and give stability to the centralised image. This medium was reinforced by both the narrative, but also by art history.

But can we consider another approach? The reflected figure (possibly a self-portrait) lies on a horizontal field that moves forward beyond the frame of the picture to occupy the space of the viewer. It could be said that we are standing in the water. The division or cut (lower frame) enables the viewer to be seduced into the picture, even as it expels

the viewer to the ground on which he or she stands. The reflective image is impenetrable. Therefore, the plane of water creates a ground for an axial shift to the vertical.

I have in mind a work that declares this shift more overtly. In the Church of Sant'Agostino in Rome, in a side chapel, is a radical painting by Caravaggio, entitled *Madonna of Loreto* (1604–1605, oil on canvas, 260 x 150 cm) (Fig. 2). It is a narrative depicting the Madonna holding Jesus in her arms as two pilgrims kneel before her. The subject of the painting relates to pilgrimage. However, one cannot ignore the importance of the dirty soles of the man's feet, which outraged audiences at the time. How could Caravaggio paint such degradation in the divine presence of the Madonna? Embedded in the dirty soles of the feet lies the forensic evidence (indexical trace) of the pilgrims' journey over the land. The soles of the feet marked the ground as the ground marked the soles.

Fig. 2. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Madonna of Loreto*

The remarkable aspect of this painting is the axial shift that Caravaggio invites the viewer to consider. The job of a pilgrim is to walk—often great distances—and the residue of walking is revealed not just in the image of muddy feet, but also in the bent posture and the staves of the pilgrims. It is a testament to the sacred journey taken through country to Loreto. The axial shift from horizontal to vertical begins to operate as we align ourselves with the feet of the kneeling pilgrim to pray to the Madonna. This standing and kneeling action is a bodily genuflection in the presence of the divine. As we kneel in the chapel, Caravaggio ensures that we are drawn into the pictorial space by identifying with the pilgrim's dirt. Thus, Caravaggio lowers the subject of the painting

by an operation of displacement, and makes the religious narrative real and tangible for a seventeenth century pilgrim.

To bring this discussion forward in time, I turn to Manet. Most critics cite Manet as the beginning point of modernism, where the subject matter moved from representing narrative (iconography) and became painting, in itself. It moved from exteriority to interiority, where meaning was located in the painting, not outside it. Historically, this move has been seen as a progressive move forward in modernism towards flatness. I need to digress at this point to clarify this. Both Greenberg and Ernst Gombrich were historicists and interpreted art in constant renewal of previous forms. That is, a progressive move forward both in history and art. As David Carrier explained, 'Greenberg argued that radically original painting built upon without breaking with, tradition'.[4] The framework constructed to interpret this art was 'formalism'. This blinkered the optics of modernism, so that the viewer only sees what is in front. In 1972, Krauss wrote in *Artforum*:

> The syllogism we took up was historical in character, which meant that it read only in one direction, it was progressive. No *à rebours* was possible, no going backwards against the grain.[5]

No going back against the grain.

PA: *I remember as a child sitting on my father's workbench, scattered with all sorts of tools and debris watching him plane and sand timber. He would often say 'don't sand or plane across the grain as you will mark the surface by cutting it'.*

It is precisely by going against the grain that one can break from tradition. To make a cut is structural. Enter Bataille and his *Documents* group, including ethnographers and the avant-garde. Krauss explained:

> The attack on exchange value was conducted by both halves of the *Documents* group, the ethnographers on the one hand as they deplored the aestheticization not only of tribal objects but of the sacred glyphs from the caves, and the avant-garde on the other, as Bataille set out to theorize that which escapes categorization altogether, 'that which would collapse any system of equivalency whatever'.[6]

It was this 'categorisation' that enabled the art historical canon and its close relative, the museum, to formalise a system that enabled entry.

By 1930, Bataille's magazine *Documents* had nearly completed a dictionary of terms that were operational in reference to the 'formless'. The formless presents an alternative framework with which to interpret modernist art; I would also include postmodernistart,

as the formless methodology concentrates on the slippage of the sign in art. It both declassifies and de-categorises art away from painting as a traditional medium.

In subsequent chapters, I will argue the importance of the sign when discussing Aboriginal art today. However, earlier in the twentieth century, there were a number of artists who began to cause a rupture in the medium of painting. Unfortunately, their history is often written in support of the modernist goal of compositional unity and plenitude—having a plot, a narrative, a beginning and an end. The story I present is an alternative interpretation that begins on the margins, where the formless—specifically in the operation of horizontality—begins to create a new technical support for a medium.

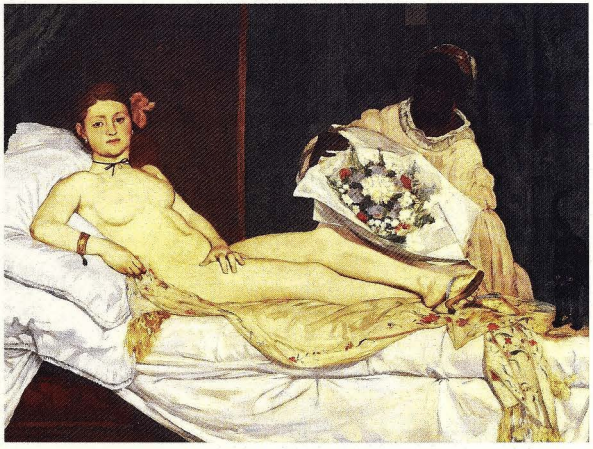

Fig. 3. Eduard Manet, *Olympia*

It is necessary to concentrate on where the formless—a certain rot—began, where lowering began, and there is no better place than the paintings of Manet. The literature on Manet is extensive, and he is mostly viewed through the framework of formalism. However, is something else happening, something that works against the grain? Like Krauss, I would suggest that there is a *low*—an operation of displacement—in Manet's *Olympia* (1863, oil on canvas, 51 x $74^{1/4}$ inches, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) (Fig. 3) that undermines a formalist reading of form/content. The word 'operation' means a performative action that has a job to complete. Thus, what is the job of Manet's *Olympia* ? What is displaced? What slides towards the low? The viewer's assumption of the goddess—both ideological and in formal terms of painting a nude—were refused by Manet. Obviously, the goddess became a prostitute and the viewer a voyeur. Manet

lowered both the idea (the narrative text was no longer about the historical goddess Olympia, but about social issues in nineteenth century France) and the tradition of nude painting (Olympia was not academically painted, but was rendered flat).

Where modernism understood art in terms of the embedded relationship between form and content, Krauss observed that 'it is neither form nor content that interests Bataille, but the operation that displaces both of these terms'.[7] In *Olympia*, both the content (the narrative text) and the form (the nude) were displaced.

The next move down towards the low is in the art of Cézanne, where not all is as appears. Cézanne's *Kitchen Table (still life with basket)* (1888–1890, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) (Fig. 4) shifted the space of the viewer. Up until that point, painting was seen to purely address vision. That is, it resisted gravity on the vertical wall, like an Albertian window. It was focused, bounded within the frame, and reinforced 'frontal ontology'. The viewer was separate from the pictorial space. However, as Jonathan Crary explained:

> Cézanne learnt from Manet: the creative discovery that looking at any one thing intently did *not* lead to a fuller and more inclusive grasp of its presence, its rich immediacy. Rather, it led to its perceptual disintegration and loss, its breakdown as intelligible form.[8]

Fig. 4. Paul Cézanne, *Kitchen Table (still life with basket)*

A breakdown in form, as Meyer Shapiro aptly described it, is 'deformation, balanced as composition but great unbalanced in the parts'.[9] In other words, it is an instability of perception. In Juhani Pallasmaa's text *The Eyes of the Skin*, he discussed the concept of vision. Vision is seen as focus; however, he also added that its intention relies on 'perspectival representation that made the eye the centre point of the perceptual world

as well as of the concept of self'[10] (Cartesian perspectival epistemology). This vision is ocular-centric and bounded; it reaffirms retinal Gestalt and always resists gravity.

Bataille's critique of Western vision and thinking in *Documents* centred on this purely optical control. His essay, 'The Rotten Sun and Big Toe', is a summation of how he wanted to strike against the high ideals of Western culture, and lower art to a horizontal world—a world of base material.

Pallasmaa also spoke of a second type of vision, called 'peripheral vision'. This is not bounded by the frame; it enters the flesh of the world, integrates with space and transforms 'retinal gestalt into spatial bodily experiences'.[11] Immediately, one senses that the eye and body are inseparable. As Merleau-Ponty explained:

> Sense of sight is an embodied vision, that is part of the flesh of the world. Our body is both an object among objects that sees and touches them because of the tangible and the visible.[12]

Let us now return to Cézanne's oil on canvas construction, *Kitchen Table (still life with basket)*, and discuss how viewers experience the sensation of instability as the fruit begins to slide off the table onto the ground occupied by the viewer's body—how the image being upright meets the horizontal ground of the body, the low. Cézanne undermined the use of perspective to paint multiple viewpoints, enabling the viewer to experience a lived position. He created a phenomenological vector in which the viewer experiences the act of perceiving, or, as Merleau-Ponty stated, made 'visible how the world touches'.[13]

What appears to be misunderstood at times is what one is touching. Cézanne's attention was not focused on rendering the glossy look of an apple on the kitchen table (depicting an object), it was on the physicality of paint itself—its material quality. The focus is on what the paint *does,* not what it *represents*. In this painting, the red pear is not a fine rendering of tone to represent an illusion of a three-dimensional red pear. No—it is flat, as if cut in half. However, what the red does is to punctuate, to draw attention to itself. Cézanne allows the viewer to experience red as it punctures the depth to bring depth to the surface. Richard Shiff speaks about Cézanne's painting as being 'all surface',[14] with both depth and surface becoming material. This is important, as it raises the question: can transparency become material, instead of being read as depth and illusion? Opacity is the raw material of paint, sitting on the surface, while transparency lies underneath, often read as depth.

How does Cézanne create this tension between transparency and opacity to achieve a painted surface that is becoming a material surface about to slide onto the ground of the

viewer? I emphasise *becoming* because it has the potential to slide. The entire painted surface grips tenuously to its support, resisting the gravitational pull of the paint slide. The phenomenological vector allows one to understand this slide, as the viewer is fronto-parallel to the painting in a field of vision, while at the same time experiencing touch due to the contact with the ground.

This disorientation disturbs the viewer's sense of what is visible and what is touchable, and questions where we should stand in relation to the painting. A number of positions are possible, and each move reveals more of the instability of the painted surface. The viewer's assumption of a still life being fixed and bounded is confounded here, as, in fact, it is not still by any means; it is just holding on. Susan Sidlauskas explained:

> Cézanne's discontinuous shifts between transparency and opaque stemmed not from the need to render a faithful description of an object but rather from a desire to calibrate passages of 'surface' and 'depth', the visible and the invisible.[15]

She added: 'Cézanne encouraged the viewer to sense and experience the bodily shifts'.

These shifts between transparency and opacity are not rendered to describe an object (picturing), but to create passages of and between surface and depth. These distinctions become ambiguous and blurred as the viewer is caught following the marks that Cézanne made in painting. One begins to experience his viewpoint—multiple viewpoints—where each dab and stroke of paint was placed. It created its own weather. This is '*touché*', as a trace of Cézanne making the work, not a vision of how well he rendered an object. Touch and vision are irreconcilable due to touch being a felt experience, while vision is optical. I would say that not only did Cézanne's doubt cause an anxiety, but it also causes the viewer to question what constitutes a still life. With such instability, moving towards breakdown, the crisis is psychological—a sure move to the low. The surface of painting is still seen as picture; however, what I term the 'rot' has come to work its way inside the structure.

In walks Picasso and sits down. Krauss speaks of his paper collages—works that shook the foundations of pictorial representation, as a sign began to slip away from resemblance to mark its absence:

> The magic, indeed the brilliance of the game it plays is that two opposite meanings, light on the one hand and opacity on the other are generated from identical scraps of paper the same physical shape.[16]

The physical place of making was horizontal, the table top, the place of printed commercial and industrial material. For the first time, it was not how paint signified in rendering space, but how found flat objects being arbitrary (blue paper is blue paper) could signify light, plane, colour, tone and surface. The traditional art-making process

of drawing and painting had collapsed onto a horizontal support where paint and canvas were replaced with found, flat material. Christine Poggi stated, 'For the immediacy of drawing or painting, Picasso substituted a process of selecting, cutting and pasting preformed materials'.[17] The table top becomes a site where one reads horizontally, and a place of making that involves a process.

Let us turn our attention to *Guitar, Sheet Music and Glass* (Autumn 1912, pasted papers, gouache and charcoal on paper, $24^{5/8}$ x $18^{1/2}$ inches, The Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas) (Fig. 5). The wallpaper is flat, decorative and represents nothing other than itself—it is an arbitrary sign. Lisa Florman explained the function of this wallpaper:

> Wallpaper as designs themselves affect no change in the pattern of our thought, they are nothing more than 'idle play' a 'decorative frill' of the system. But Picasso's collages—the successful ones, at least—by demonstrating their non-reconciliation to the ineluctable flatness and banality of the wallpapers are able to achieve some measure of autonomy.[18]

Fig. 5. Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Glass*

While one reads wallpaper as ground, attention is drawn to the centralised white circular shape of cut paper pasted on top. This causes the wallpaper underneath to now read as depth. This shift of ground to depth is the first move in the game. The white circular shape, being opaque, reads as figure, but then shifts to act as depth behind the wallpaper (the absent hole of the guitar shape). This non-reconciliation is the dialectic of negation, according to Hegel. His dialectics are concerned with opposites being reconciled to a new synthesis. To negate this is to establish a game in which opposites are pitted against each other. In the case of the white circle being a figure on wallpaper, it then redoubles either to opacity or transparency (depth). The white reads as figure (solid), but also as

the hole of the guitar. Therefore, white performs as black. In this way, the sign circulates and reattaches itself to another meaning, depending upon what lies near it. This continual shifting of figure and ground, positive and negative, enables the process of signification to occur. As Krauss stated, 'No positive sign without the eclipse or negation of its material referent'.[19]

To read collage, not just as visual forms, but also as linguistic shifters, allows for a sign to be absent—in this case, depth or even black is absent due to the rules of the game, which do not allow illusion or perspective. Ironically 'the shifter', as Carrier explained, 'is a linguistic sign which is filled with signification only because it is empty'.[20] The guitar/wallpaper can be read as depth, even when flat and frontal, without the use of painting's illusionistic depth because collage enabled it, through its absence, to be read on the pictorial surface.

A different slippage of the sign occurs with the use of newsprint. In the *Guitar and Wineglass*, newspaper—an object of popular culture—operates extensively as a sign, continuously shifting, not to its opposite as absence, but to a play with a difference—a play in which nothing is resolved and all things remain ambiguous. The binary logic of opposition has been transcended; absence is no longer its opposite. This means that, from a distance, the fine print of the newspaper dissolves into tone, rendering text as tone, while up close, it can be read as transparent, plane, edge and even political narrative. At no stage is the sign stable. The viewer becomes acutely aware of being involved in a process of signification that is not about the object of perception, but about negotiation.

In this collage system, reading takes place in a pictorial field that is frontal, bounded and vertical (upright to vision). However, the process of layering one flat material shape over another by cutting and pasting on a table shifts the axis of making to the horizontal. Thus, while Picasso's process is horizontal, his collages remain vertical.

At a similar time, Duchamp was working against the aesthetic of painting, retinal Gestalt and traditional art-making materials, but for very different reasons. The 'readymade' was introduced and associated with exchange value, commodity and consumption. For the purpose of this paper, I am interested in how Duchamp undermined the sign through the operation of horizontality.

Thus, let us turn briefly to the example of the *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–1914, complex construction of multiple parts inside wooden box, 129.2 x 28 x 23 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York) to understand how Duchamp lowered the sign onto

the horizontal matrix. A ruler is a standard arbitrary sign of measurement. Held vertically, parallel to the horizontal, one is able to measure a length of string—its length from point A to point B. With gravity, the string would collapse to the horizontal field of the floor, the length from points A to B becoming much less, and immeasurable by the standard ruler, as the length of string is no longer a taut straight line from A to B, but a series of waves and curves. One can still measure with a ruler from points A to B, but the standard measurement will vary—hence, 'three standard stoppages'. This demonstrates the lowering of the sign, ironically, through the negation of standard measurement.

How does horizontality, as discussed in the four instances above, create a new set of conventions? Up until now (except in the case of Duchamp) these works engage with picturing—a pictorial system of resemblance—even when the materials and processes have been lowered to the horizontal matrix. Even Picasso's collages are lifted back up to the vertical to be interpreted through picturing. How can we reconcile vertical pictorial practice with the operational process of horizontality? What set of new conventions can be established to analyse this axial shift? This will require not just a shift in medium, but a means with which it may be interpreted. It may involve other senses than just the eye, other concepts of painting than the mirror imaging of our upright selves. What constitutes a medium, the material or the concept? In the past, this aspect of medium has been framed from an art historical position, a received history of easel painting, and a picturing system that started with the Old Masters and led to the flatness of the New York School (as Greenberg explained).

I have mentioned successive breaks within this formalist reading of modernism. Armed with Bataille's idea of the 'formless' and the operation of horizontality, we have observed ruptures of the sign. Manet's slippage of the narrative text (content) and the nude (form) were displaced. In the slippage of Cézanne's work, vision and the space of the floor were no longer separate. Picasso's collages enabled a slippage in which the sign became a linguistic shifter. Duchamp's ready-mades were an attack on picturing. These were tremors; however, a seismic break was required in order for painting's medium to shift to the horizontal. With that event, a framework could be laid for the beginnings of a cross-cultural dialogue.

PA: *I remember sitting on the inma ground in Nganyinytja's country, waiting, when suddenly in front of me Nganyinytja appeared, dancing with both song and paint of the wanampi. I could not sense the difference between snake and figure, between the figure and the ground.*

This memory reminds me of when I came upon a Pollock painting at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, 1984. Never before had I encountered a Pollock, and I knew very little about his work. However, as I approached, my body stopped, as I was transfixed by the 'smell' of lavender. This was painting, I thought, as I sucked in all the air I could—painting such as I had never seen before. Intoxicated by the smell and the vision, not wanting to move, I finally stepped forward to be engulfed by the paint. It was much later that I learnt the title of the painting—*Lavender Mist* (1950). I knew, of course, that this was not a painting of lavender; it was much more. It was the tip of an iceberg, and what lay beneath its horizontal plane was unfathomable.

We need to go no further than Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* (1947, oil on canvas with nails, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches, etc., $50^{7/8}$ x $30^{7/8}$ inches, The Museum of Modern Art, New York) (Fig. 6) to address the horizontal matrix of his work. Laid on the floor, unstretched linen became the ground of work, a site for labour. This axial shift from the easel, from the verticality of image to the horizontality of the making process, defines a critical break in art. In this discussion, I will argue that horizontality collapses form, and, in its wake, picturing. As a result of this, one cannot recourse to the traditional medium of painting to address Pollock's work. The tradition that sees colour as depth and line as contour is undermined through the horizontal matrix and process. This work begins to create a new medium that belongs to horizontality. However, it is the response to Pollock some years later that will define the break in the medium and establish a new set of conventions. Let me outline the foundations of what Pollock enabled the next generation to undertake.

Imagine standing up, looking down at a horizontal plane, at any found material one has dumped or thrown onto the site. Decisions are made regarding how and what to throw or dump, and the actions are different depending on the material. Rules have been established. This sounds familiar; however, we are not at the local garbage and recycling centre; rather, the industrial site of Pollock's workplace. However, there is missing equipment: no brushes with hairs, no stretched linen supports, no artist quality oil paint, and no easels. All that is required is un-primed linen rolled onto the floor, industrial paint and sticks.

This address to the support on the horizontal plane fundamentally changed the way of painting. The difficulty lies in language. Using the verb 'to paint' immediately raises the entire modernist history of painting as medium that Pollock tried to work against. In order to avoid this issue, I will refer to mark-making on the horizontal site as 'process'. To begin with, there is no right way up, as one can walk around the rectangular un-primed linen. This means that there is no top and bottom, as it depends on where one

stands. This goes against the vertical field that Gestalt psychology calls 'anisotropic'—meaning that a support must have a top and bottom because it belongs to picturing that mirrors one's upright self. This horizontal matrix is no longer a field of vision supporting verticality, but one where creating becomes a residue of a process involving the whole body. It is on the ground—the ground at one's feet where gravity is felt, a lived space, the space of our body, and a space of culture.

Now let us return to the ground of *Full Fathom Five*. There are three conditions to consider when engaging with work that is made horizontally: the horizontal address, the material and the process.

Fig. 6. Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five* (usually hung on this vertical axis)

The information given with the work *Full Fathom Five* is oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches, etc. Size $50^{7/8}$ x $30^{7/8}$ inches. These are not traditional materials. With the canvas lowered to the floor, the address is horizontal because all material obeys the pull of gravity. In this case, gravity thus provides a particular condition for creating. The materials used are low or base: 'cigarettes, coins, nails, etc.'—all studio or factory detritus that is often found on a work floor, waiting to be swept up and piled in the rubbish bin. However, in this work, it is dumped onto the horizontal canvas, along with the skeins of paint that have been thrown. As the skeins of enamel metallic paint and oil paint land on the surface—wet on wet—they stain, puddle and smear, but never mix to form mud. If anything, each skein cuts across the action of the figure below. This continual process of throwing skeins that layer over and stain each other, drying unevenly, bleeding into each other, drooling, dripping and puddling, is a direct attack on vision.

I am suggesting that the horizontal axis has now become a phenomenological vector involving the whole body. As one leans over, stands beside or walks on the work, the fronto-parallel plane of distance is collapsed. No longer is one surveying a scene across distance with a horizon that is always vertical. Instead, the body is in the work—there is no distance, there are no boundaries. Skeins of paint are thrown, dripped and poured on and beyond the framing edge of the canvas, onto the wooden floor. They are indistinguishable. Therefore, the painting is not one of vision, but one of process.

Depending on the viscosity of the paint, enamel left to air for some hours will tend to thicken. This paint will pool, run, or hold its ropey form. It will not run off, as it is not vertical. The quality of skein after skein, line after line (note that the line has no hard edge), colour after colour, digesting or suffocating what went before, is non-collagenic (it does not allow the surface to breathe). Since Pollock employed the heavy use of black to completely underscore what is beneath, he made a direct attack on the figure. The viewer can see the action in the gerundive form of the verb (that is, as continuing in the present).

The importance of the dialogue that Pollock had with his material and process is that they remained in his work as a trace and index to horizontality. As Krauss explained, 'Gravity was what had combined with the liquidity of the paint to read through the finished work as a sign of process'. She quoted Morris as saying, 'Only Pollock was able to recover process and hold onto it as part of the end of the work'.[21]

I have described the site, the materials used and the process as all being horizontal. However, what happens when Pollock drags this work up onto the wall to the sight of the viewer? This axial shift from the horizontal to vertical is critical for an understanding of Pollock, and also for some Aboriginal art, when it too moves from the ground of process to that of vision. What lessons can be learnt from Pollock as one begins inevitably to sublimate the process into the field of vision?

With Bataille in mind, we ask the question, 'what is the job here'? What are Pollock's drip paintings doing to form? A good beginning, often stated, is that Pollock would raise his work to the wall to become familiar with the painting—to decide a right way up. Pollock recognised the field of vision; he always knew the work was destined for a gallery wall. However, for many writers, this became an act of sublimation, bringing the work back into the field of image—no more so than for Pollock's neighbour, the writer Ralph Manheim.

During discussions with Pollock, Manheim provided titles to a number of works. It is interesting to note that Pollock did not give titles to his works, meaning that he was not making any reference to meaning outside the work. He was not painting pictures; instead, he was reinforcing the idea behind process art—namely, that it enables ideas to be formed during process, not applied or constructed from an idealised vision. However, Manheim's titles, such *Full Fathom Five*, *Big Dipper* and *Vortex*, do indicate sublimation, using metaphors to bring image back into the field. This ultimately occurs when the viewer leaves the horizontal axis of creating and brings the work into the field of vision. The titles are interesting, as they refer to looking down. 'What is unmistakable, the title suggests, is that the axis of image has changed'.[22] In a frustrated response to the viewer's habit of picturing, Pollock's later works were titled with numbers.

Returning to *Lavender Mist* (Fig. 7), acknowledging its horizontality and process, it must be considered what happens when the painting rises to the wall. The density and thickness of the residue of the process reads as a repeated series of marks that layer over each other, dissolving what went before. Rather than the material of paint being optical, one both sees and feels it. The verb 'dissolving' refers to a solid becoming a liquid, and this returns the work from a vertical to a horizontal reading. It is all paint; in phenomenological terms, we experience the full weight of the paint as a repeated series of thrown, weblike marks that were unable to resist gravity on a horizontal surface. The viewer is surrounded and engulfed by paint.

Fig. 7. Jackson Pollock, *Lavender Mist*

Formally, colour and line are oppositional, such as contour and field, figure and ground. However, we have learnt from Picasso's paper collages the purpose of the linguistic shifter in the process of signification. Text reads as tone, transparency, depth and plane. Therefore, is it possible to read colour operating as line in Pollock's work? The usual job of line is to cut because it marks as it divides. In Pollock's case, this was a liquid gesture, and gravity caused it to mark horizontally, leaving a residue as an indexical trace. This immediately undermines any reading of *Lavender Mist* as the visual field of all-over painting. There are no tones or values to declare depth, as each gesture announces that the job to cut on a horizontal axis is to cut vision away from image. Line cannot be contour, as this suggests a figure in relation to a ground. Figure and ground is the binary code of Western perceptual logic.

Krauss explained that the liquid gesture is 'one and the same stroke cancelled and testified'.[23] In other words, the liquid gesture cancelled the figure, but also declared what was underneath, with the horizontal support being an indexical trace of the process. Therefore, through a repeated series of cuts, wave after wave of gestural liquid dissolved depth to reassign the job of colour as line. Krauss thought Jacques Derrida's *différance* was helpful in articulating this movement ('presence of meaning is always deferred from one sign to another in an endless sequence'[24]). The evidence suggests that the process of signification in the collapsing of form in Pollock's painting creates a slippage of meaning that ultimately operates in the present.

Finally, Bois and Krauss identified the break associated with horizontality in Surrealism, with Alberto Giacometti. This will be discussed in the next chapter; however, in reference to Morris responding to Pollock's collapsing form, they stated:

> The operational character of Morris's thinking turned on the distinction he made between the 'well built' and the unconstructed, the former being everything man has fashioned to resist the dispersive force of gravity—including, in the field of art, the stretchers that support canvas, the armatures that hold up clay, and all the other rigid materials, from marble to bronze, that are employed. A function of the well built *form* is thus vertical because it can resist gravity; what yields to gravity, then is *anti-form*.[25]

Many artists have responded to the phenomenological vector of Pollock's horizontality and collapsed form. Eva Hesse's *Right After*, Morris's *Untitled: felts* and Serra's *Castings* are all examples discussed by Krauss in *The Optical Unconscious*. However, before we move onto Serra, we need to visit Rauschenberg's workbench.

PA: *I remember sitting on my father's workbench using a brush to spread glue over the newsprint to be placed on top of the diagonal ends of sandpaper to create a join for a sandpaper belt. This was then clamped together by using thick pieces of felt on either*

side, board placed on top and bottom, placed in a vice and clamped. It was a material sandwich. Seen from above, the labour of his process was scattered all around me.

In 1972, Steinberg called Rauschenberg's workbench a 'receptor surface'[26]—a flatbed surface where the horizontal process of embedding found flat objects remained in the work. This surface also allowed 'human consciousness, a depth that can include the human subject'.[27] This was not the inner depth of the artist's psyche, but the external world of language. I take this to mean all of the optical noises of the public language that surrounds us. The term 'flatbed' was taken from the horizontal work plate of a printing press—a work surface. A shift from the vertical to the horizontal has finally been declared as a work surface, not one of vision, but of process. Steinberg identified 'the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture'.[28]

Fig. 8. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled, Combine*

Nature/vertical to culture/horizontal. Thus, when Rauschenberg's *Combine* (Fig. 8) is raised to the vertical, the horizontality as an operational process remains in the work. It cannot be sublimated into image. No longer is one rendering an object of resemblance, no longer is one picturing, no longer is one constructing an idealised vision. Picturing has been replaced by process, and the receptor surface as a workbench receives all the information through a process of sticking, gluing, smearing, scraping, sanding, rubbing and nailing—a work of labour that becomes the residue of an event.

This sanding, planning and rubbing against the grain is not optical. The concerns are not with composition (the unification of a surface), but with a process during which objects

are embedded in a work surface. This is the world in which we iron clothes, walk, sit, eat, work and sleep—a place where gravity allows our feet to connect to the ground, to the horizontal. Objects such as postcards, photographs, scraps of paper and newsprint are glued, pasted to a workbench, and any reference to an image is compromised while it beds itself to the surface. This is a shift that declares a break from tradition, a break that will now require a new set of critical criteria. As Steinberg explained:

> The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior event. As a criterion of classification it cuts across terms 'abstract' and 'representation'.[29]

At each successive stage in this chapter, I have argued towards a lowering through the concept of Bataille's horizontality, which was aimed to attack the field of vision that underscores the canon of received art history and practice. We now move onto establishing a new medium of horizontality and a set of conventions that will provide a framework for the beginning of a cross-cultural dialogue.

In 1972, Steinberg wrote:

> The all-purpose picture plane underlying this post modernist painting has made the course of art once again non-linear and unpredictable. What I have called the flatbed is more than a surface distinction if it is understood as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer. Yet this internal change is no more than a symptom of changes, which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or painting as such. It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories ... leaving the old stand by criteria to rule an eroding plain.[30]

PA: *I remember in my father's workshop playing with a container of flat lead pieces that would be hung onto the end of the belt sander to give it tension. I would sit on the floor tearing the lead pieces in half, it was soft to tear, and it was like nothing else, the motion slow.*

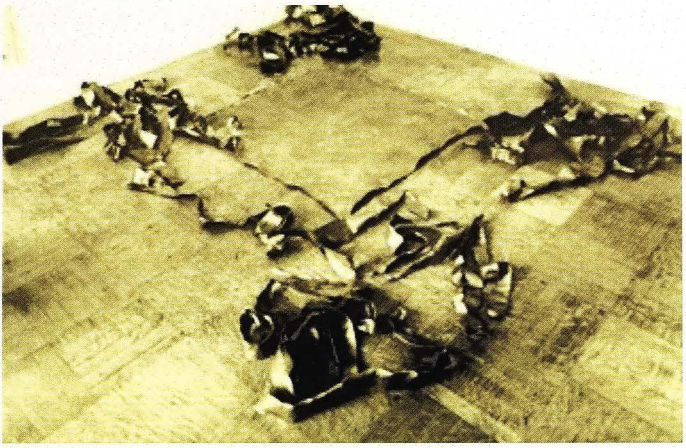

Fig. 9. Richard Serra, *Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1.47*

Serra's *Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47* (1968, torn sheet of lead, measuring 118 x 106 inches, Musée National d'Art Moderne-CC, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris) (Fig. 9) is an example of horizontality and process. The word 'tearing' immediately brings one to the process. The making is phenomenologically connected to the process and the horizontal support. Being a transitive verb that relates to an action, the action is itself retained in the work as the presence of making. The viewer is required to experience the work as it is placed to enter/negotiate the signifying system as a process of signification. Serra was not constructing an object, but was focusing on the action to create the work—its internal logic—inviting the viewer into the process.

Between 1967 and 1968, Serra composed a verb list that developed from his observations of the processes involved in the production of work (the list appeared in *Process Sculpture and Film in the Work of Richard Serra*). He referred to them as actions that relate to oneself, material and place. In other words, the material condition, how it was made and the place it occupied for the viewer. Those three aspects are encapsulated in horizontality.

In Serra's *Tearing Lead*, horizontality becomes a support for the medium, not of sculpture, but of practice. Krauss, of recent years, has avoided the term 'medium' for the obvious reason that for the viewer it conjures association with the traditional use of materials specific to a medium (sculpture in bronze or painting in oil). Traditionally, the conventions and technical skills of sculpture or painting supported an idealised vision that resisted gravity. To avoid this misconception, I will refer to horizontality as a

support for the medium—the horizontal matrix generating a set of conventions that will speak directly to its horizontality.

So what are the conventions of horizontality? If one takes the example of *Tearing Lead*, it is the operational process that Steinberg referred to that becomes important in constructing meaning. The title refers to a performative action, a verb, and by tearing around the perimeter of rectangular flat plane of lead, Serra was inviting the viewer to experience 'tearing' phenomenologically.

In the essay, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', Krauss discussed and identified the birth of a convention when she stated that a 'work must find the syntax internal to the event itself, and this is the syntax that it will formalize'.[31] In regard to Serra's work, the syntax internal to the event is the transitive verb 'tearing' and, by its recursive action, it produces rules that will establish the structure. Thus, the residue of this 'tearing' event becomes an index both to the horizontal field and the process.

Time was critical in this process: the title includes 1.00 to 1.47 minutes. The operation begins around the rectangular framing edge and, as tearing follows this edge, it also invades the shape by cutting away its edge. Each length of tearing carries the process of the left hand twisting and the right hand turning, in successive moves, until it has reached the end on the north side. As a residue and an index to the trace of tearing, it remains where it lies at the corner. This is repeated again on the west, south and east sides. Once all four sides have been torn, the process is repeated again; however, each time, the residue as the gestural mark of tearing becomes increasingly shorter in length.

It is time that stops this incessant flow/wave and halts the process. To continue would destroy the shape, and the gesture would be read as an object, not an index to the process and horizontality. Each tearing along its length becomes a gesture embedded into the horizontal surface. Time allows the viewer to experience the meaning of this interruption, and to contemplate its consequence. It is at this point that 'tearing' operates as index to an event and the past unfolds into the present, stopping time and allowing contemplation of the future.

In conclusion, the use of the Bataille's horizontality in the operation of the formless has enabled the reassessment of a received history of art. This is significant in terms of reclassifying and re-categorising art from a style to an operation. By using structural linguistics—in which meaning is understood by virtue of its opposite, and the displacement of the sign, which allows a slippage—the medium of horizontality can be interpreted not as a style, but a methodology. This methodology is tied to practice. I

have argued that the support for this practice is horizontality and have demonstrated that this generates its own set of conventions that are located in the work's internal logic.

I argue that the space between the upright figure and the field of vision has collapsed to the horizontal plane where ground becomes a condition of touch. This action redefines the viewer's sense of place when encountering the work, so that (to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's expression) one feels oneself to be 'in the flesh' of the lived world, not as a construction of an idealised vision. This places the viewer in the present and asks them to explore or negotiate the perceptual experience of the site/place, with the use of the perception of the body in space and time. This present goes beyond the frame of picturing as the viewer experiences it. It is no longer about the essence of the painting medium (its inherent flatness), but is about the function of the work—what the work is doing.

As Steinberg indicated, a shift from 'nature to culture' enabled the medium of horizontality to generate its own set of criteria and conventions through the operational process that has now become a ground for practice. I will argue in the next chapter that this methodology permits a cross-cultural dialogue—one that respects cultural differences. Kgnwarreye's art provides a lesson that calls into question Western art categories and classifications, and challenges vision as the primary sense to which these are addressed.

Chapter 2: Kngwarreye's Lesson in Horizontality

This chapter will examine the claim in the received history of Western art that Emily Kame Kngwarreye's art falls within the category of abstraction. I will take an alternative position, using Bataille's concept of the 'formless' as set forth in the *Documents*, to argue that Kngwarreye's work is misrepresented when assimilated into a Western aesthetic. The aim is to explain how the horizontality of Kngwarreye's art is a lesson that teaches us to rethink abstraction, and to view her painting as a theoretical object. I will argue that horizontality not only collapses the oppositional difference between the concepts of representation and abstraction, but also creates a new set of conventions that will become a ground for a cross-cultural dialogue and for critical thinking.

PA: *I clearly remember 1984, not by George Orwell's book, but by the Te Maori exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. This exhibition exemplified the correct procedures of consultation required in curating an exhibition of work by Maori. The curator created a framework for effective dialogue that enabled Maori to mount an exhibition of art from their perspective. It was sacred and political. What a different experience at the time for New Yorkers, as opposed to the Museum of Modern Art's 'Primitivism in 20th Century Art' curated by William Rubin at the same time, which was roundly attacked by the critics for its central concept of affinity between the tribal and the modern.*

The most coherent of the critics, James Clifford, wrote in reference to Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*:

> Nowhere does the exhibition or catalogue underline a more disquieting quality of modernism: its taste for appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-western arts in its own image.[32]

This raises the argument of mimesis, in which aesthetic pleasure is reaffirmed through the desire for resemblance. Clifford recognised that process, rather than resemblance, is valued in indigenous cultures. He cited the Igbo artist who sees 'value as process rather than product, process is motion while product is rest'.[33] However, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) exhibition framed Western art alongside tribal art in terms of resemblance, and even the use of similar materials. As Clifford indicated, Rubin used Picasso's image *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932[34] and the Kwakiutl half-mask to demonstrate likeness. It would have been far more instructive to demonstrate how Picasso understood the Grebo mask as an arbitrary sign, bearing no resemblance to the referent.

Texts dealing with Rubin's exhibition by both Krauss and Bois analysed how Picasso's understanding of the sign led him to explore the process of signification in the medium *papier collé*.[35] (These texts stimulated by the exhibition that re-examined Picasso's cubism by Krauss and Bois.) As demonstrated in the previous chapter, pieces of printed matter were used as a linguistic shifter to become plane, tone and edge, while the process of cutting and pasting became the tools of making, rather than brushing and painting.

To concentrate on resemblance, as Rubin did, negates the linguistic function of signs to shift, and in turn assimilates likeness into its own image. It is this *picturing* of desire that ignores the process—specifically, the horizontal vector in cubist works and in indigenous art, including that of Australian Aboriginal artists. The denial of horizontality as a process in the painting of Kngwarreye is a failure that continues to do an injustice to her achievements. For example, *Big Yam Dreaming* must acknowledge the dimension of the ritual in representing the yam dreaming.

As Krauss and Bois showed, the habit of picturing entered the reading of Western abstraction even when, as in the case of Picasso, the abstraction worked against picturing. It continues today in the reading of Tuckson's art. For example, how often does one see a Tuckson painting compared to a Kngwarreye? The reason for this is that the colourful graphic mark appears in both. Structurally, however, the artists' responses to the surface could not be more different. If it must be compared to Aboriginal art, Tuckson's painting has more in common with the bark painters of Northern Australia, due to his understanding of frame and surface. Both artists use the framing edge as an internal device to map the surface—often expressed by Tuckson as 'up and down and across and back'.[36]

Meanwhile, the most absurd assumption that I have heard (from a prominent Melbourne dealer) is that Kngwarreye saw and responded to a reproduction of a Bryce Marden painting—most likely *Cold Mountain VI—Bridge, 1989–91*. This kind of comparison becomes far more serious when voiced by a curator from MOMA in New York. Once again, at our own peril, we fail to recognise that horizontality as a process is a residue of an event, is meaningful, and can generate a new set of conventions. Throughout this chapter, I will explore this concept of the surface, horizontality and process, touching first on Alberto Giacometti and the African masks that appeared in Rubin's *'Primitivism'* catalogue.

As Krauss acknowledged, her radical re-examination of Giacometti and, later, Picasso, was enabled by her discovery of Bataille's *Documents*, in which he introduced the notion of the formless. Bataille's 1930s *Documents* group (including Giacometti) deplored the popular aestheticisation of tribal objects. The surrealist group's aim was to use words that had an operation—that had the job to undo 'good' form, ultimately attacking the central category of art criticism. 'Good' form reaffirms verticality—human verticality or uprightness—elevating the work to a moral position, one of dominance or power. Bataille's formless collapses this 'good' or upright form, and, in so doing, collapses the modernist boundaries between primitive art and Western art. In other words, the 'formless' brings art down into the world from its high pedestal: from the vertical to the horizontal. Krauss recognised that Giacometti's sculpture from 1930 to 1933 played a serious game with Bataille's notion of horizontality. Krauss stated:

> The rotation of the axis onto the horizontal plane was further specified by the contents of the work as the 'lowering' of the object, thereby joining simultaneously to the ground and to the real—to the actuality of space and the literalness of motion in real time.[37]

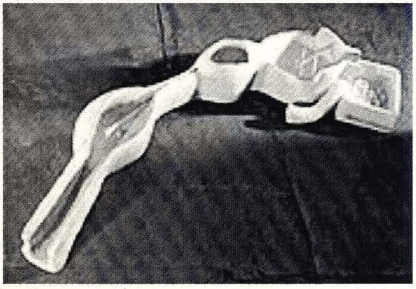

Fig. 10. Alberto Giacometti, *Project for a Passageway*

Giacometti's plaster sculpture *Project for a Passageway* (Plaster, 6 x 50 x 17 inches, The Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Kunsthaus, Zurich) (Fig. 10), referred to by Giacometti as *The Labyrinth*, is of particular importance. Whether in painting or sculpture, good form always resembles the world from a vertical position, mirroring the erect human gaze over the horizon—a position of visual control and moral uprightness. To lower this is to bring it down to the horizontal base where the horizon disappears. One now enters the labyrinth, the phenomenological space where there is no illumination, where distinctions are blurred, and where the body repositions itself to function in darkness. I am reminded of Merleau-Ponty's ideas of 'embodied thinking' when the painter takes his body with him. Juhani Pallasmaa explained:

> The most abstract of tasks would become nonsensical when detached from its ground in human embodiment. Even abstract art articulates the 'flesh of the world' and we share the very flesh, as well as the gravitational reality of the world, with our bodies.[38]

This lived space relies on ways of seeing other than just vision. It relies on the body as a lived experience, in phenomenological terms; it is how the body functions *within*, as well as being *of* the space. Form has now collapsed to the horizontal vector, where it becomes the ground of a lived experience. It is no longer a space that absorbs, assimilates and integrates the other to sameness (homogeneity), but a new space that is unclassified, unseen and cannot be received into the canon of art history.

I like to use the term 'blindness'[39] to explain Bataille's third term, 'heterology', which avoids the two sides of the dialectal position that resolve differences into sameness.[40] By its very nature, blindness is opposite to opticality. Without the eye, the body becomes the perceiver, and it is through this that one engages—the body committed to experience. The phenomenology of the labyrinth opens the way to multiple points of view. As Krauss stated:

> In doing so, the work of the heterological become obvious, because it forces one to see that it was always on, in and through the body of the perceiver that the aesthetic paradigm operated; that these operations were merely sublimated by an idealist subterfuge that wants to describe the work of art as a function of the disembodied modalities of sense.[41]

Therefore, the labyrinth and its horizontality reposition the body on the ground, the earth's surface. Caravaggio's *Narcissus*, the mirrored self-image of a man in an upright position, has no relevance here. Instead, we go below to the labyrinth of the underground Minotaur. Bataille cited a 1930s article by Roger Caillois about the habits of the praying mantis, in which the insect performs life, even when dead, so that the boundaries of real and imitation—the binary terms of difference—collapse. This ability to perform is important because it declassifies representation/mimicry by blurring the very boundaries of reality and imitation. Bataille described this process as 'alteration'[42]—a kind of marking that creates a third term, wholly other.

Let me explain by reference to Kngwarreye's epic painting *Big Yam Dreaming*, in the National Gallery of Victoria (Fig. 11). When this canvas was elevated to the gallery wall, an operation occurred in which the low, the *ground*, was raised to the sacred space of Western art. For Kngwarreye, the sacred was the ground upon which she worked, and the gallery wall was merely a commodity. That is, in the horizontal practice, all material remains as evidence of process. Once elevated to the wall (commodified), a spectacle is created whereby an image is conjured.

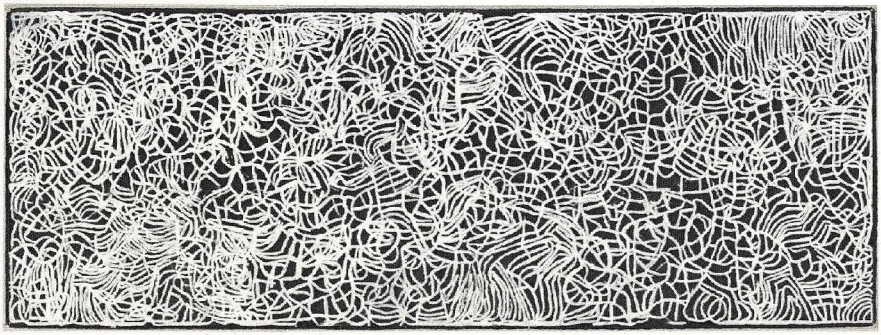

Fig. 11. Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Big Yam Dreaming*

However, this action, 'pointing to opposite directions simultaneously'[43] is an axial shift that produces a third term. 'To alter' is to change, and I would argue that this axial shift occurs when looking at Kngwarreye's art on the wall. As it delivers its meaning in this shift, her art must be considered as a theoretical object. I am referring to Krauss's term used in the following passage from *Preying on Primitivism*:

> In opposition to this state of affairs I would argue that it is not as historical object that primitivism can profoundly effect [sic] our notions of modernism, but rather as a theoretical object.[44]

I argue that Kngwarreye's *Big Yam Dreaming* is theoretical as an object insofar as it enables one to examine ideas and theories about painting and aesthetics, as well as matters of historical, political and cultural importance. As we know, the term 'primitive' is no longer relevant in the context of a contemporary exhibition. I would therefore strongly contest the positioning of Kngwarreye's painting solely in an Aboriginal art section of the gallery, as it limits an understanding of the operational structure of her work. Framing it in a cultural context with others of its kind may be appropriate in postmodern gallery thinking, but it only reaffirms a modernist category.

PA: *In the mid-1990s, I remember a gallery dealer from Melbourne saying that Aboriginal art, in particular Kngwarreye's art, is 'abstraction with content'. Soon after, at the 'Wijay Na' conference in Darwin, the same phrase was presented to me for response. My immediate reply was to say that by making such a comment, we do not understand the nature of Western abstraction.*

There are two implications here, and I need to digress at this point to explain where the confusion lies, and why Kngwarreye's painting forces Western art to examine its own ideas on abstraction. First, by implication, the statement implies that Western

abstraction does not have content, and, secondly, it implies that Aboriginal art is abstraction. I refute both of these assertions and will explain that we have forgotten or misunderstood abstraction. The categories of our received history of Western art have failed to acknowledge the rupture that Kngwarreye's painting has caused.

The recent exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), *Paths to Abstraction 1867–1917*, curated by Terence Maloon, magnified the problem of this received history by implying that all modernist artists abstracted from nature. This ignores the fact that Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich invented a new language that was anti-representational and anti-referential and employed the conventions of painting, such as space, line and colour, as the subject of painting itself. Wassily Kandinsky, on the other hand, certainly abstracted from nature, and cannot be considered an abstract painter, insofar as his art always has a reference to music, literature or nature.

Instead of understanding abstraction as *abstracted from* something (representation), let us consider what it *does* (performance). In other words, how does abstraction work against picturing, against illusionism, and become real and of itself? The problem arises in the framework of the discussion on this topic. The received history has a narrative (the AGNSW exhibition), a plot, a beginning and an end, as Greenberg believed.

Stepping aside from this linear (teleological) approach, let us turn to the Polish artist, Wladyslaw Strzeminski, and present the case that abstraction is beyond picturing, that abstraction determines space and is of itself, which means that it does not participate in representation. In a seminal study, entitled 'On some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs',[45] Meyer Schapiro discussed the non-mimetic qualities of painting. He explained that painting has a number of qualities that refer to itself, the frame, the surface, the edge, the colour and the brush mark. It is these qualities that Bois identified in what he called the motivation of the arbitrary or the sign in cubism and suprematism, and also in the art of Strzeminski and his wife, Katarina Kobro. It was the motivation of the arbitrary that Strzeminski explored in his practice. Strzeminski, himself, remarked upon the limitations of his contemporaries:

> It is the quality that is crucial, not the quantity. Numerous artists now famous (Rodchenko, Stepanova, etc) cannot even conceive of the efforts that were deployed to attain the solutions of cubism and suprematism. Unconscious of the values contained in the realizations of the new art, they make a 'new art' all the same, without developing it, without raising new questions, but compiling in their work fragments of those of their predecessors.[46]

Strzeminski saw abstract art as a laboratory in which to test ideas—in other words, to research—and through this approach, his practice became theoretical in itself. In 1924, he wrote:

> A real = autonomous existence in the plastic arts: when a work of art is plastically self-sufficient: when it constitutes an end in itself and does not seek justification in values that subsist beyond the picture. An item of pure art, built in accordance with its own principles, stands up beside other worldly organisms as a parallel entity, as a real being.[47]

For the true abstractionist, painting was an investigation of the non-mimetic qualities listed above. Picturing and illusionism had to be fully undermined, and this was achieved by confounding the perceptual logic of the figure and ground opposition. In the work of Strzeminski, depth as the space that permits figuration is subsumed by surface, whereas in Kandinsky, it is always the ground for a figure.

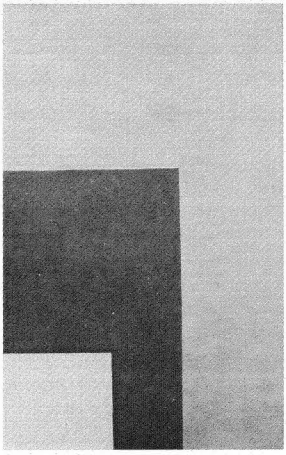

Fig. 12. Wladyslaw Strzeminski, *Architectonic Composition 9c*

In Strzeminski's *Architectonic Composition 9c* (1929, oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm, Museum Sztuki, Lodz) (Fig. 12), one can begin to see and experience his devices at work. Strzeminski responded to the vertically shaped canvas to create two 'L' shapes and a square. The divisions are such that they respond to the surface proportions of the support, as well as responding to the framing edge of all sides of the rectangle. Any attempts to read this as a pattern are undermined. The three shapes are continually asserting themselves against each other. Therefore, figure and ground are confounded and a destabilising movement is created. The dark shape (red) reads as a ground, only to shift to a figure on a pale grey/cream. In the most dramatic move, the white rectangle becomes a square. It is a figure (by its name) that hovers between figure and ground. The framing edge of the support tightens itself around it to enclose it, forming the square, causing the frame to act as boundary for the shapes above. Thus, the dimensions of the canvas determine the arrangement of the shapes.

The continual slipping of the sign, as in Picasso's collages, is operational; each shape shifts its position to regain control of what it lies beside. It is this movement that repositions the viewer from one who pictures, to one who experiences perceptual shift. The work determines its own space for us to enter and negotiate. It is a lesson on how to see anew. This perceptual logic of figure and ground later became a point of departure to be tested by artists. For example, Mondrian squared up the surface through a dynamic equilibrium, Pollock destroyed the figure and ground dialectic through colour used as line, and Robert Ryman unfolded the painting process to declare process as surface.[48]

Clearly, the non-mimetic qualities of painting (internalisation of the frame and the support) are not the concern of Kngwarreye. Nor is resemblance in the form of perspectival representation. The categories of abstraction and representation are null and void when considering her art. However, there is a theoretical position in twentieth century art criticism that is pertinent for an examination of non-Western art, including that of Kngwarreye. In the 1972 article in which the term 'postmodern' appeared attached to Rauschenberg for the first time, Steinberg identified the horizontal matrix of Rauschenberg's combine paintings (the 'flatbed picture plane') as a radical departure from the spatial ideal espoused by Greenberg. When Steinberg stated that horizontality as a process declassifies the terms of abstraction and representation, he was declaring a clear break in the received history of art.

Later, Krauss enriched this concept through the lens of Bataille's *informe*, particularly in her studies of surrealism. One of the categories of the formless was horizontality, which, in practice, not only lowered the axis from the verticality of representation, but also debased good form utterly, and gave process privilege as the motivation of painting.

If there are three things one can say without fear of contradiction about Kngwarreye's art, these are:

- First, she works on the ground, and even sits on her painting (conceiving of the marks in a horizontal matrix);
- Second, there is no 'good form'—nothing that relates to image—in her painting; and
- Third, her art is pure process.

Terry Smith saw Kngwareye's art as abstract and concerned with non-mimetic qualities. He wrote:

> The fundamental condition of abstract painting: the artist's presumption as to the nature of the surface to be marked and of the kind of space to be initiated by the marking.[49]

Smith applied this thinking to Kngwarreye; however, the problem is more complex than this. Smith did not acknowledge how the frame's internalisation of the surface is used in abstract painting, which is a fundamental condition in abstraction, as it is self-referential. Smith's surface and marking can be applied to both representation and abstraction; both conjure up figure/ground without stating the operational quality that abstraction undermines.

Smith added, against evidence, that 'abstraction is grounded not in ideas but in the materials of representation',[50] concluding that the support for Aboriginal artists, specifically for Kngwarreye, is 'provisional'.[51] He wrote that, 'They were already in command of the emptiness between the designs they knew and the perimeters of the space they had to fill in'.[52]

Abstraction is *about* ideas, and the role of materials is that they signify *in their own right*. One need only to look at Morris's felt piece *Untitled*, 1968, in which the felt does not represent, but is subjected to, the force of gravity and time. This is critical in understanding the quality of the material used, which collapses when the work is lifted from the horizontal position of making/cutting, to the vertical wall of image. The axial shift creates anti-form; materials do not represent, instead, ideas are being tested. Hence the materials are 'readymades'.

Throughout Smith's text, he compared a mark made through picturing in Western art to the marks made by Kngwarreye, which are made through process. He failed to recognise the axial shift from horizontality to the verticality of image, from icon to index.

To make parallels with Pollock, as Smith did, is to engage in picturing. It is a failure to understand that Pollock's skeins actually performed and had a job to do—namely, to undermine the ground. In doing so, the repeated gesture of cutting (rather than marking) enabled colour to be read as line, but not line that bounded a figure. Instead, the skeins destroyed the ground in their complex layering. This is in opposition to Kngwarreyes's art; she would not undermine her ground. If there are any parallels, it is in the horizontal axis of the rectangular support. Pollock's support was not empty—it was to be acted upon. He attacked a white surface, sometimes un-primed, and this was a loaded symbol: it was the irreducible modernist flatness posited by Greenberg. Kngwarreye's canvas was not empty, but nor was it a modernist space. As Mary Alice Lee stated:

> That the Aboriginal artist regarded the support as a continuum of the literal ground *upon* which it rested, colouring it red or black accordingly, has been most convincingly argued in anthropological literature.[53]

Lee sourced Frank Dubinskas and Sharon Traweek, who maintained:

> that the earth's surface acts as a porous membrane between the temporal zones of the quotidian and the Dreamtime. Spirits can pass through this membrane during ceremonies, occupying the body of the celebrant, which has been painted with designs related to that spirit ancestor.[54]

Therefore, the black support preferred by Kngwarreye in *Big Yam Dreaming* is already one of substance, one of process, where the ground rises to be joined with the mark. It is not one used to create an illusion of depth any more than the mark in *Autumn Rhythm* was used to create a picture. The support cannot be 'provisional' for Kngwarreye because, by laying the canvas onto the ground, it already has meaning. It is the job of the Aboriginal artist to mediate this space with the ancestral spirits through process. This is ultimately linked to ceremony through the re-presentation of the power of *Tjukurpa*. As Diana James explained:

> Anangu say *Tjukurpa* was in the beginning, and all things came to be alive through *Tjukurpa*, and all things continue to be sustained by it. In this sense 'Tjukurpa' is an active verb: not a 'Dreamtime' but rather a present continuous 'dreaming'.[55]

Finally, I turn to Smith's use of the phrase, to 'fill in'. It is often stated by writers such as Smith that the Aboriginal artist's job is to fill in the spaces between the initial marks (for example, rarrk is often spoken of as in-fill). I object to this because it returns the work to the realm of decoration, ornamental abstraction or representational abstraction. Western abstraction is often misread in the same way. One can identify the importance of the support to both cultures in declaring it a space to be acted upon, considered, and responded to, but obviously with very different outcomes. The challenge in looking at Kngwarreye's art is to not find ways to include her work in Western art history, but to engage with it as a theoretical object via the formless concept of horizontality.

My task is now to demonstrate how Kngwarreye's painting *Big Yam Dreaming* can be considered a theoretical object. I have shown through my assessment of William Rubin's exhibition at MOMA, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art*, that current categories are ineffectual when considering Indigenous art, as they typically picture the mark as being of good form, Gestalt-driven, and thus able to be assimilated into a Western art aesthetic. Furthermore, in assessing Indigenous art, it is a requirement to be critical. Lowering causes a rupture of such dimensions that one is forced to re-examine the received history, and articulate why Kngwarreye's art is not abstraction. Second, when the mark is seen as image in *Big Yam Dreaming*, the operational process, in which an

oscillating axial shift occurs—the axial shift from the horizontal of process to the verticality of image, and vice versa—is denied. Bataille's horizontality, an operation in the formless, collapses the categories of representation and abstraction and, in doing so, enables a reassessment of the conventions. I follow this reasoning in my critique of *Big Yam Dreaming*.

PA: *I remember sitting down to be painted up by Sandy Mutju, and watching another man painting white marks (symbols of emu tracks) on a black body. We were being prepared to dance the emu. Emerging from behind the bushes we were all standing in line, positioned, then out of the darkness the sound of song filled my mind as movement and paint became inseparable, and we became emu.*

In Aboriginal thinking about country, the world (land) touches you as you touch the world (land). As Diana James stated:

> This philosophy is conceptually convergent with Anangu belief that the land and all living things are embodiments of their ancestors; their flesh is the flesh of animal, plant, trees and rocks.[56]

This is relevant to the discussion of *Big Yam Dreaming*. *Tjukurpa* (Dreaming) relates the physicality of the land through the expression of song, dance and paint. It is impossible to think of Kngwarreye's painting in isolation to song and dance. My experiences in the 1980s with Nganyinytja, an Anangu Pitjantjatjara elder, taught me the importance of *inma*—that is, that the songs sung in paint and in dance evoke the power of *Tjukurpa*. James explained:

> Ontology can be most closely translated into the Anangu language of Pitjantjatjara as Tjukurpa, the word of the Law that created all things and is the reason for being. The metaphysical aspects of the Tjurkurpa that are central to Aboriginal ontology, the nature of being, are all referred to in the present continuous tense of being, knowing, actively causing and existing in time and space.[57]

'The present continuous tense of being, knowing, actively causing and existing in time and space' reminds us of the phenomenological space of Serra's transitive verb. He referred to an action that is retained in the making of the work, with the viewer being required to experience that action in the present. He remarked that the actions relate to oneself, to material and to place.

After Kngwarreye's painting of *Big Yam Dreaming*, Aboriginal people came to witness the ceremony inside the painting—the painting was evidence of the ever-present site of ceremony. The active participation of the viewer engaging in the work occurred in real time and in a space that was present. This experience in the present makes the English translation of *Tjukurpa* as 'dreaming' seem inappropriate, as it connects to a past,

instead of interpreting it as an ontological model for the nature of being that connects all things to the present.

I emphasise the difference because Western ontology divides, while Anangu ontology is inclusive, with all things connected through *Tjukurpa*. The Western system requires exclusive categorisations of all things, such as art, law, economics, science, culture, politics and environment, and therefore there are different epistemologies of knowledge. Each area has its own philosophy, its constructed frameworks. As James stated, 'Anangu epistemology relies on finding the interconnection of all things within Tjukurpa, inclusive cyclical thinking'.[58]

Maybe this is the meaning of the 'whole lot, Awelye' that was often evoked by Kngwarreye in relation to her paintings around 1994 to 1995. The 'whole lot' is inclusive of painting, music, dance (ceremony), land, law, women's business and so on because all is understood through *Tjurkurpa*. I believe that Kngwarreye was also instructing the audience to understand her painting in these wider terms.

Now we turn to the horizontal process in *Big Yam Dreaming*.

PA: *I remember when Big Yam Dreaming was painted. William Mora rang me in Humpty Doo very excited, saying there was big talk; people from all around Kngwarreye's country were coming in to see this painting. William flew out to Donald and Janet Holt's Station at Delmore Downs the next day to see the painting, and later negotiated the gift to the National Gallery of Victoria and the people of Australia. In other words, its importance to art was beyond that of the market.*

Big Yam Dreaming was painted in 1995 at Delmore Station, over a period of two days. The primed linen was painted black and later stretched onto a rectangular frame, measuring 291.1 x 801.8 cm. From the video evidence, it lay on a concrete floor. Terry Smith recalled:

> Kngwarreye began from one end and worked steadily, over two days, to the other. Her tendency was to lay down one stroke, then bring back another stroke towards it, followed by a third stroke connecting the two, dipping the brush into the can for fresh paint each time... Most of the markings on this canvas were made by the artist working from a seated position on its unpainted void, reaching in front of her, making short, curving sweeps, connecting one tendril line with another... When she came towards the far end of the canvas she paid greater attention to the bordering areas on all sides, painting up to the edges then back in towards herself. When she reached the end sections she began painting from outside the canvas inwards with a series of closing-off gestures. Having declared the painting finished, she responded briefly to the people around her, struggled to her feet and walked away to her camp.[59]

From this careful description, it is obvious that Kngwarreye's working practice was horizontal and that the framing edge had bounded *her* in time and space. The framing edge asserts itself on the work *as* Kngwarreye negotiates the rectangular surface. There are no marks that continue beyond the framing edge. When the framing device asserts its rectangularity, the compression of lines is her response to this edge. Kngwarreye must respond to the given rectangular structure, and to its *right way* up: she was aware that the work was going to hang on a wall.

Big Yam Dreaming is a black canvas that is already an activated ground, being understood as a permeable membrane of what lies beneath—the land and ancestors. By sitting on the support, Kngwarreye pulls the ground into the present by marking the lines around her body. This is akin to the ceremonial practice of bringing the ancestors up from the ground through singing. Catherine J Ellis stated, 'Through correct interlocking (of song text) the power of the ancestor, being drawn out of the earth by the strength of the song, is present'.[60] She explained, 'The presentation of the ancestor in ceremonial form links past and future simultaneously with the present'.[61] This painted ground has no depth—it is not a void, it is a surface. The movement upwards means the work begins to operate in the present. Kngwarreye's white marks against black do not exist in a figure/ground relationship. The dialectic figure/ground collapses in this work.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Derrida's term *différance* could help explain this collapse. As Kngwarreye reaches out from her body, with a brush in hand carving curved sweeps, the mark an index of the hand's gesture, the white mark activates the black ground by drawing it upwards. This action, this cut, produces *différance*—that is, meaning is *deferred* from one sign to another. Black is no longer understood as a void or as empty, but as a material substance. The job of the mark is to activate this as presence—that of the yam dreaming ancestor.

An alteration has occurred; a change in perception. The logic of Western perception as binary opposites has now changed with the introduction of a third term. It is no longer homological; it is heterological (wholly other). Figure on ground gives way to ground on ground. In Gestalt psychology, this would be literally beyond vision.

What is truly remarkable is that the working process changes the relationship of black and white, figure and ground, to one in which numerous readings are possible. Being a residue of the process, the surface becomes an index both to the process and the horizontal field. Viewing the work becomes a matter of negotiating the shift from

horizontality, where the syntax to the event was created, to the verticality of picturing. To merely look for the picture is to deny the quality of the process.

Kngwarreye's posture is one of engagement, of sitting in a position similar to that in which she beats time during *inma*[62] by hitting her inner thigh. I am reminded of an earlier painting by Kngwarreye, *Awelye*, 1990, in which the painted marks on her breasts were a continuation of the same marks on the canvas. The location of the canvas was of the same proximity to her breasts. Her marking process clearly demonstrates her dexterity and her physical and intellectual skills. Lines are made in response to her arms' length and are then connected by marking segments across. After stopping to be refilled, the brush returns to connect with what went before to give a double mark, resulting in a pulse of white on white.

Each response is building a structure that is a continuous rhythm of descending and rising as the opacity and transparency of white travels across the subterranean surface to either expand or compress. Both the outside edges of the brush cause an intensity of white at the edge as the pigment pools. This sometimes leaves an inner transparency that dissolves the depth of the black beneath. The fluctuations of the marks cause a movement throughout the structure that remains consistent. When distinctions are collapsed between figure and ground, black and white, transparency and opacity, one becomes aware of the process of signification. A slippage of meaning that operates in the present occurs as one discovers that different aspects are being communicated simultaneously. The viewer is placed in a position of continually negotiating the movement between black and white and figure and ground, and from process to image.

As Ellis explained:

> Aboriginal music has an iridescent quality. The colour depends on which aspect holds one's attention at any one time. The structures, even if completely unaltered, can appear first in one form, then in another. The multiple sets of possible variants around one pattern increase this potential.[63]

Ellis continued:

> In a performance of Aboriginal music, one figure in the whole can be aurally identified and then perceived in different relationships to other simultaneously occurring patterns, which become background; then one of the background patterns can emerge as foreground, to be turned around in various ways in relation to its background, only to be replaced by a new focus of attention.[64]

This structure of song is, I believe, another model for understanding the nature of Kngwarreye's process. Through ceremony they are, of course, essentially connected.

What is the condition of this new medium of horizontality? I now return to the surrealists and their term 'automatism'. However, I do not mean the action of automatic

writing to delve into the unconscious (psychic address) or Carl Jung's ideas, which are often mentioned in relation to Kgnwarreye's painting. No—by automatism I mean investigating the condition of the new medium (horizontality) by 'establishing a new automatism'.[65] The automatism or the repeating gesture/action (process) on a horizontal matrix is the location where meaning is induced and constructed. In Chapter 1, I gave the example of Serra's *Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47*. The recursive action of tearing lead produces the rules that will establish the structure and be critiqued by those rules. This generates its own set of conventions that are located in the work's internal logic. Stanley Cavell explained:

> First to the sense that when such a medium is discovered, it generates new instances.
> Second the notion of automatism codes the experience of the work of art as 'happening of itself'.
> Third impulse ... is to register the sense that the point of this effort is to free me not merely from my confinement in automatisms that I can no longer acknowledge as mine, but to free the object from me, to give new ground for its *autonomy*.[66]

When Kngwarreye arrived from her camp to paint, it was in order to do work. What are the conditions of her work? As I related, the black canvas surface is flat on the ground (not a void). It is a ground to sit on, a lived space, an embodied space, a space in which to do the work. Sitting on this surface opens it up, and the first gesture is invited—a gesture of recognition that connects the painter to the support. What is the automatism/medium that generates new instances/conventions in Knwarreyes's *Big Yam Dreaming*? The medium is horizontality and the convention lies in her action, *not* in the Western notion of *action painting*. That idea misrepresents both Kngwarreye and Pollock, as I said earlier. His liquid gesture dissolved depth to reassign the jobs of colour and line.

For Kngwarreye, the autonomy also lies in the quality of the materials and the action. The type of brush enabled the viscosity of paint to be held in the hairs as a liquid. It was acrylic paint thinned by water to produce a consistency that enabled a continuous flow, curving as it carved across, towards and away from her body. When the paint had travelled its course, it was dipped back into the can to absorb more liquid, and then returned to its origin to respond to the last mark, either as a continuation or to move in another direction. This repeated gesture was always in response to her body being in/on the ground. Essentially, the body sitting horizontally on the ground made the work. In Pollock's *Blue Poles* and the late work of Tuckson, this was done verticality: 'the upright body gestured the verticality of the support'.[67] For Kngwarreye, the horizontality became an index both to the horizontal field and the process.

Therefore, painting's traditional actions of applying the brushstroke to a surface across a distance are irrelevant here. The body's proximity and the horizontality annihilate the distance of contemplation and rationalisation. As Erwin Strauss explained, 'The upright posture removes man from the ground, things, his fellow men, placing him in opposition to all and everything. He has distance from the ground'.[68] This vertical space beheld by distance opens to a contemplative gaze by looking *over there*, mirroring the upright self, which is the opposite of Kngwarreye's horizontality as she is *in there*, with no distance.

The body on the ground is the mark of the index of the song and dance of *Tjukurpa*. Kngwarreye's line is not an imitation of the rhizome tuber of the yam (picturing); she deals with its condition, with its being in the world. That is, the lines being marked are of her world and are about the connection to *Tjukurpa* through song. In terms of phenomenology, Kngwarreye is literally *in* the world as she marks the surface that surrounds her; she is connected horizontally, she touches and is being touched when making the work, and she thus embodies *Tjukurpa*. The action that produces her convention is not so much one of digging, as some suggest (although this can be a useful term), but of singing, re-presenting her connection to the ancestors. Repetitious marking, line after line, encircling, compressing and expanding, wave after wave, unites the mark and support in a common ground because it has a job to do. Its job is to reassign the task of drawing the line for song.

Kngwarreye's automatism, her invention, is drawing for song. In Western art, the convention of drawing divides the surface and creates a depth of field. In Kngwarreye's art, the job of line has been reassigned as a connector to the ground, to a songline. The viewer experiences this movement. To stand in front of the painting *Big Yam Dreaming* is to engage in its frontality, its presence, and to experience the sensation of a pulse. By pulse, I do not mean an optical pulse, but a pulse as a connector—a connection to the rhythmic beat of the process. The job of horizontality is to de-sublimate image to a rhythmic pulse that is beyond picturing. To bring the gaze that seeks image down into the world to the beat of one's feet. It is a return to the ground that *Homo sapiens* left when they stood upright to view the world. The viewer's own body recognises this shift, as the pulse felt is both of oneself and of *Big Yam Dreaming*. This is Kngwarreye's gift to the nation and to art. This pulse is what connects the viewer to the work.

As Cavell stated of painting, 'It is *totally there,* wholly open to you, absolutely in front of your senses, of your eyes, as no other form of art is'.[69] By the very scale of the painting, one is engulfed, invited to enter. To see it as a picture is to fail to recognise the

importance of horizontality as a process in activating the senses of one's own embodied memory.

Ian Mclean stated, 'This ambiguous achievement of remote Aboriginal art is evident in the art world's failure to integrate Aboriginal art into the history of modernism and Australian Art'.[70] Aboriginal art does have its own history; however, to integrate this art into the existing categories and narrative is a crime, as it assimilates the art for aesthetic pleasure. It denies Kngwarreye's work as a theoretical model—one that challenges the categories of a received art history. In fact, Kngwarreye teaches us to see again under a new vector—that of horizontality. It challenges those categories and reinvents what is understood by the medium of painting, the meaning of figure and ground, and the meaning of process and image.

This new medium of horizontality can address both cultures, and create a new ground for dialogue. This new ground—the horizontal vector—allows for a performative action to be formalised in the internal event itself. In Kngwarreye's case, drawing for song becomes a pulse that we can all experience.

Chapter 3: Reading Bedford's Track/Tract

> Your starting-point is the surface that you have to give life to (a canvas or piece of paper) and the first spot of colour or ink you throw on it; the resulting effect, the resulting adventure. It is this spot that, as you enrich it and guide it, should direct the work. A painting is not built the way a house is built, according to the architect's blue prints. On the contrary: you turn your face away from the outcome, you grope your way backwards! You won't find a method for making gold just by looking at gold. Alchemist, hurry to your retorts. Boil some urine, gaze, gaze eagerly at the lead. That is your task. And you, painter, spots of colour, spots and outlines. Look at your palettes and rags. There you'll find the clues you're hunting for.
>
> Jean Dubuffet [71]

This chapter will further examine the use value of horizontality by focusing on a group of paintings by Paddy Bedford from 1998 to 2004. I will first analyse Jaminji's foundational work in the East Kimberley, and its echoes in the art of Rusty Peters and Bedford. As with Kngwarreye, Bedford's gouaches of 1998 to 2004 signal a clear break from the perceptual logic of figure and ground in painting. They raise the question of the operation of automatism—whether the action perpetuates itself to become a convention.[72]

I will examine what action was generated in Bedford's work to collapse the traditional concepts of representation. I will use the horizontal matrix theorised by Bataille to investigate what is critical, and will direct the viewer to the operative gesture that lies within the shifting ground of Bedford's painting. This action of *doing* something, as opposed to *meaning* something, becomes the ground for a cross-cultural dialogue that goes beyond the received history of art.

Fig. 13. Paddy Jaminji, *Djuwarlin—the other side of Mount House Gap*

The strangeness of the title, *Djuwarlin—the other side of Mount House Gap* (earth pigments on plywood, 90 cm x 61 cm, 1985, Holmes à Court Collection, Western Australia) (Fig. 13) is its specificity regarding place and the notion of another side. To name a painting directs the viewer to look for likeness, which is wholly inappropriate to Aboriginal art. However, Jaminji directs the viewer away from narrative and representation, to the other side or back of Mount House Gap—to something that must not be seen by the uninitiated—through the use of ambiguous, amorphous, dissolving shapes. It is this move that *does* something, directing the viewer to an operation within the work.

In this way, what we know to be the frontality of the painted surface, embodying the meaning, becomes one that operates. In one decisive move, the fronto-parallel plane registering to vision in Jaminji's painting has collapsed. There is no reference point, no horizon, and soon one is aware of approaching what lies 'on the other side'. The left side of the painting reads as horizontal (no right way up), even with the painting upright on the wall, whereas the right side stays vertical (there is a top and bottom) and tends to read as image. The result is a bifurcation of the painting so that it yawns and closes like a trapdoor. The disorientation of the gaze that occurs is akin to blindness. Darkness falls and the cave opens into a labyrinth where no retinal mirror exists for self-representation. There are no paintings of humans in this cave: this is the place of the Minotaur, a place of no vision. As Krauss stated:

> If art began in caves, its starting point was not the space of architecture, with light differentiating vertical pillar from horizontal slab, but that of the labyrinth, with no light, no differentiations, no up, no down. Its master image is the Minotaur, not Narcissus. As Bataille was to insist over and over again, its cause was not form but alteration.[73]

Through its bifurcation, Jaminji's painting functions as an alteration. One is confronted simultaneously by its frontality and its other side (experienced as horizontal). The phenomenological effect of this operation is the portal taking Jaminji's people to the 'ngarranggarni (or to the dreaming)'.[74] Krauss described this as 'a desire to articulate the most inwardly felt experience and to be able to objectify it at the level of the sign'.[75] It is not the image that conveys the spiritual meaning, but the shift that takes you there.

It may be helpful to consider 'the perceptive model' that Bois discussed in reference to Hubert Damisch's writings on painting.[76] The perceptual model returns painting to materiality and process. Its constituents (line, colour and design) are no longer a mirror view for likeness, but are operational. As Bois stated:

> Damisch's interest [was] in the detail of the signifier, the texture of painting, everything that, according to Sartre, insofar as it is real, 'does not become the object of aesthetic appreciation'.[77]

A Western aesthetic appreciation that leaps to the signifier to seek an external referent is endemic to how the paintings by some East Kimberley artists are elevated to image. By ignoring the horizontal process that actually undoes such a reading (for example, the way that black functions as a ground and also heightens the experience of the actual ground), we are diminished as human beings. The perceptual ambiguity created by the constant shifting of the figure and ground relationship is dominant as an operation here and elsewhere in Aboriginal art.

Jaminji was born at Bedford Downs station in 1912, and lived and worked in the East Kimberley with his father, Julkurji (a medicine man) and his mother, Ruby Julumanal. Kim Akerman pointed to an important time in history that had a profound effect on Jaminji and other Aboriginal people in this region. This event became the beginning of what is known as the East Kimberley School of Painting. It was Christmas Eve, 1974, when Cyclone Tracy caused devastation further north in Darwin. This disaster was seen as a universal warning: 'Do not lose the Law—do not to discard your identity'.[78] Perhaps less well known is the fact that the initial paintings of the *Kurirr Kurirr palga*—Rover Thomas's Dreaming in reference to Cyclone Tracy—were painted by Jaminji under the direction of Thomas (Jaminji being his classificatory mother's brother).

In the same way that we noted with Kngwarreye, Jaminji's painting forces one to acknowledge the making of the work on the horizontal matrix, with the ground as a place of ritual. I would like to reiterate what I stated earlier that lowering the canvas to the ground enables the operation of Bataille's formless, which *declassifies* those notions of form tied to resemblance. Instead, the viewer is placed in the phenomenological space of experience. As Damisch wrote:

> The notion of form is changed—if not cast in doubt altogether—by the projection onto the vertical plane of the canvas on the horizontal plane of the floor, which no longer functions as a neutral and indifferent background but as an essential factor in the vision of things, and can—almost—constitute the very subject of painting.[79]

I would claim this axial shift indeed does constitute the subject of Jaminji's work. In fact, most of the work of this region participates in this operation, to varying degrees. By oscillating between two polarities, the viewer is caught up in the axial shift from the horizontal (the ground of process), to the vertical (the frontality of image in which the

viewer intervenes in calling up an image in his or her consciousness). Either way, the viewer has to reorientate, to look at the horizon or at the ground beneath his or her feet.

This axial shift is to not engage in a play of opposites because that ultimately involves reconciliation (dialectics will not help here). In Jaminji's painting, one attempts to reconcile these opposing viewpoints and fails, as the opposing two directions (horizontal/vertical) are equally assertive and neither one comes to dominate. In Western art, opposites on a painted surface are intended to create tension, whereas the bifurcation in *Djuwarlin* strikes directly at vision.

The painted surface is a shape-shifting surface, in which the viewer attempts to locate a ground within the logic of relationships. When one cannot find an image (figure against ground), then, according to Damisch, one must pay attention to the material (quality/texture) of the painted surface—something that rarely, if ever, occurs in the scholarly literature that examines Aboriginal art (for example, Judith Ryan and Phillip Batty in Origins of Western Desert Art, Tjukurrtjanu).

In general, the early paintings used natural binders made from kangaroo blood mixed with natural spinifex resin to fix the pigment onto a primed canvas because a primed canvas resists absorption. However, in Jaminji's case, binders were not used. He instead used earth pigments, so they could be absorbed into an un-primed plywood surface. Thus, the support asserts itself and even comes forward through the paint. These earth pigments, which are sometimes referred to as ochres, are of the land. They are used in ceremonies on bodies and are infused with the meaning of the ancestral beings. The plywood surface of the painting (unlike the resisting skin of a human body) becomes a porous ground, like a membrane to what lies underneath. When the black pigment is laid down as ground, it swells upwards (like yeast). It can no longer be seen as neutral, but is active and ready to interact with other ochres. I do not ascribe to the position of some writers (such as Michiel Dolk in reference to Bedford in the Museum of Contemporary Art catalogue) who have explained this in terms of black and white (chiaroscuro)—in other words, a rendering of illusionary depth.

In looking at Jaminji's painting, I am reminded of an excellent description given by Krauss for understanding depth, and this may be useful when thinking about his painting. Taking a pencil and holding it parallel to the plane of vision, we see a bar (say, five inches in length) with a pointed end—a shape given as an extension. If we turn the pencil 90 degrees, so that it is perpendicular to our plane of vision, we do not see five inches across a field, we see a compression—all five inches compressed to one point.[80]

This helps explain why the ochres on the left side of Jaminji's painting operate as a compressed plane.

Jaminji has depicted 'the other side of Mount House Gap'. He achieves and retrieves a sensation of what lies behind by establishing a game between each contrasting shape, according to its material. There is no layering of one pigment over another, as the pigments are very unforgiving, do not blend or mix and lie flat and matte, absorbing light. Although red ochre appears as a framing edge, it operates within the field as a figure on a black ground, as do the two areas of yellow ochre. However, black refuses to remain inert in the compressed space. It lies now in front and now behind the ochres, allowing them to slide laterally behind one another. The space implied is the 'other side of Mount House Gap'.

In 1985, Jaminji made another two paintings that I believe reinforce his language of painting. One is *Djuwarlin—small rocks on the hills between Wyndahm and Mt House Station make the hills difficult to climb* (90 cm x 61 cm, earth pigments on plywood, 1985, Holmes à Court Collection, Western Australia) (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14. Paddy Jaminji, *Djuwarlin—small rocks on the hills between Wyndahm and Mt House Station make the hills difficult to climb*

The image in Jaminji's painting is never definite. Again, we are given the title as a place—*Djuwarlin*—but it also indicates another set of possibilities when it goes beyond the specific locality to tell of its inaccessibility. This is no map or diagram, as the ground is not neutral; again, it generates a field of operations.

While the paint seems to orientate to a right way up, the markings extend forward from the artist's body, making for a horizontal reading. A Western gaze would see the painting as vertical (a series of rugged hills), but the actual marks move away from the artist's body, which is centrally positioned at the lower edge. So where does 'difficult to climb' come into play in this painting? Jaminji marks a circular area to place one's body against the lower framing edge, a point of orientation for the body. However, the painted lines surrounding it travel the entire frame, becoming an internal frame for the red ochre field, which reads as flat/land. The impossibility of discerning a horizon or sky means that the experience of the painting is vertiginous. Relief comes with the expanse of red ochre, except that it becomes apparent that there is no point of access to this ground—it is difficult to climb.

The second painting is *Djuwarlin—Mount House Station Gap and aerodrome* (90 cm x 61 cm, earth pigments on plywood, undated, Holmes à Court Collection, Western Australia) (Fig. 15) was probably painted in the same year, as it has the same dimension, material and support. However, there all similarities stop, as each painting operates very differently.

An initial reading of the painting gives two ochre lines surrounding two black rectangles, while a red ochre line contours the support to enclose a black ground. This reading soon dissolves, as the red ochre appears to be stacked on top of the yellow ochre, compressing to frame a black field. This black field is seen as figure that casts a transparent shadow on what lies below (the support).

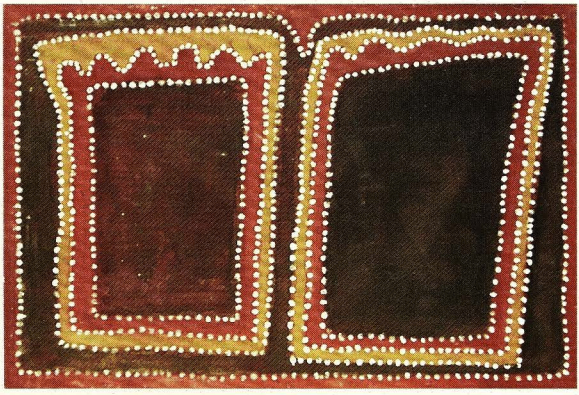

Fig. 15. Paddy Jaminji, *Djuwarlin—Mount House Station Gap and aerodrome*

Therefore, the black becomes fully operative as an index to the real—the aerodrome. This is a Western construct that is not part of Aboriginal Law. However, what lies underneath is Law. By incorporating a Western concept into the painting through a cast shadow (aerodrome), the past and the present open to a future. By creating depth through a linguistic shifter, as absence may signal a way forward, Jaminji is speaking directly to white people—possibly saying that two Laws may exist on the same ground.

To briefly summarise, I have argued that all three paintings by Jaminji have no image or representational field, and that the uneasiness we might feel in front of each painting is a result of its ambiguity, confounding figure and ground, and layering and compressing space. This is theoretical because it is not reachable by vision alone, but is experienced phenomenologically through the body. It is this rupture from the verticality of Gestalt to the horizontality of process that declares a gap between vision and touch. This gap or space is a passage to be entered, enabling a new insight into Kimberley art for Western eyes.

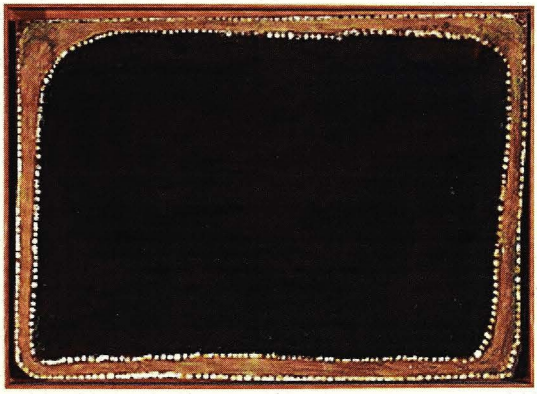

Fig. 16. Rover Thomas, *Lulumalulu at Mount House*

Before moving onto Peters and Bedford, it is appropriate to acknowledge Thomas—particularly an early painting of his, entitled *Lulumalulu at Mount House*, 1983 (Fig. 16). This painting is, without question, horizontal. Natural earth pigments and natural blinders, applied with a rag onto plywood in an all-encompassing field of black bounded by yellow, destroy the possibility of a vertical/landscape reading. One cannot help but look down as the framing edge and the shape simultaneously open up before one's feet.

The dotting around the outside edge of the frame contours the irregular shape of the support, while the dotting inside the frame contours the ground, making it a generative force. The painting is not a frontal field rising to a plane of vision (a diaphane). Instead, *Lulumalulu*'s ground gives way to a depth that becomes a function of touch. By this, I mean that as the viewer stands and connects to the framing edge, the desire for self-reflection within the internal space is subsumed into the effect of the labyrinth. In the future, Bedford explored this contour of shape as a gesture.

PA: *I remember Rusty Peters coming inside to look at a painting that I had just finished during our painting of Two Laws One Big Spirit, in 2000. It was Number 3 of my work and Rusty asked me how I got that black; he thought black 'shouldn't do that'.*

Peters is a senior Gija man, born under a Warlagarri or Supplejack tree on Springvale Station, south west of Turkey Creek, in 1935. His Aboriginal name is 'Dirrji', which refers to dingo pups looking out of a hole at sunset.[81] In 1989, Peters was employed as an assistant at Waringarri Aboriginal Arts in Kununurra. For the next eight years, Peters worked with Queenie McKenzie and Thomas.

Two Laws One Big Spirit[82] was a dialogue in paint between Peters and me, which was initiated at Crocodile Hole when I first met the Jirrawun Artists in 1998. It was then suggested that Peters and I paint a series together. Later, while teaching in Darwin, an invitation was extended to the Jirrawun artists to become Artists in Residence. During the first six months, I painted in the same studio space as Peters, during which he observed my process, which entailed, as ever, working on the ground. Eventually, Peters contacted me to paint a body of work together. At this point, we established the rules, which included the number of paintings, dimensions of the paintings and colours to be used (red, black and white). The works began on Good Friday at Humpty Doo and were completed 14 days later. The process was one of response—Peters painted the first work and I responded, and then he responded to my work. In this way, it was completely reciprocal.

Soon after we began painting, I realised we had entered a game—a game that I likened, at the time, to chess. Game playing was not uncommon to Peters, who understood painting to operate in a set of strict rules, or, as we would say, that the sign operates in a system of values. By using structural linguistics (pioneered by Ferdinand Saussure), painting has often been spoken of in these terms. Bois famously explained:

> If, during a game, a piece is lost—for example, if the knight is carried off to some obscure corner by a child—it does not matter what other piece replaces it provisionally; we can choose arbitrarily. For it is the piece's function within a system that confers its value.[83]

It is this concept of value in a system that is not representational but functional that Peters, like (Jaminji and Bedford) continually plays with, within the confines of his Law, and that enables him to paint the same story in many different ways. The sign undergoes numerous changes. For example, the same sign could identify a waterhole, a woman's stomach or 'a water brain'. The ability of the sign to operate in this way enables the artist to reveal or hide details. As Krauss explained, 'For the shifter is a case of linguistic sign which partakes of the symbol even while it shares the features of something else'.[84]

This system of values operates within a set of rules. As has been documented on other occasions, at Humpty Doo, Peters sat deep in thought for days before he placed paint on canvas. This thinking process is how Peters decides how he can play. He always respects the rules (adhering to the Law), even as he shifts the sign.

The painting I have in mind is entitled *Place I was Born*. It is Number 1 in the dialogue (120 cm x 120 cm, ochres on linen, 2000, Grantpirrie Collection, Sydney) (Fig. 17). Previously, I wrote that Jaminji established the foundations for the next generation of artists from the Kimberley. Thomas has also been widely acclaimed in developing this language. It is perhaps less known that Thomas directed Peters to paint within his (Thomas's) design structure. After Thomas passed away, Peters began painting with the Jirrawun Aboriginal arts group.

Fig. 17. Rusty Peters, *Place I was Born*; Peter Adsett, *Number 2*

The importance is not in the superficial referent of the title (the place Peters was born—a cave), but in what the painting surface does. *Number 1* is a shifting ground of black, white and red ochres that collapses form through constantly confounding the perceptual logic of figure and ground. It defies Western vision, for we must lower our heads to the horizontal, where the cave is not an image, but runs deep into the labyrinth. As the physical referent shifts to an action, the painting unfolds onto a horizontal matrix.

Like Jaminji, Peters's black pigment works partly to enclose the red ochre shapes as figure, only to release it to fall underneath as a red ground and connect with what can only be regarded as a membrane. The same operation occurs with the area of white pigment bounded by the red border. I say 'membrane' because the red, black and white are always asserting themselves as figure, but none is able to hold this. Constant shifting occurs, created by a surface that is not read as a solid.

My painting *Number 2* (acrylic on linen, 120 cm x 120 cm, 2000, Grantpirrie Collection, Sydney) responded to the unresolved figure ground shift, which Peters immediately understood. From this dialogue arose the idea that became the subject of the series—'two laws'. *Two Laws* defies expectations because the viewer seeks a settlement of terms, which the function that I have outlined does not allow. The sign ebbs and flows without resolution, deep within the structure of painting itself, and gives it a troubling edge for the viewer. All of Peters's work contains this edge, but nowhere more than in this epic series.

In this lies the confusion that is felt by some people who write about paintings from the Kimberley and further afield. Repeatedly, a code is formed in the viewer's consciousness of maps—a concept of an aerial view. In doing this, one has identified the reference (hill, aerodrome and so on). By extension, this becomes a picture *of* a landscape—the referent lying outside the painting. The problem lies in confusing the sign with the referent. In Peters's case, the lowering of the canvas from the verticality of vision to the horizontality of process shifts the sign from symbol to index. Therefore, what is signified in *Two Laws* is located in what paint does, not what it represents. The importance of this system of values is that it enabled Peters to activate the sign so that it places the viewer in the position of mediator of the axial shift, keeping them forever on edge.

PA: *I remember it was August 1998 after the Telstra Aboriginal Art Award that we left to travel to Croc Hole to visit a group of artists who were painting at Bow River Station. William Mora and I were invited by Tony Oliver to come out and see the new paintings. It was here that I meet Rusty Peters and Paddy Bedford. One particular*

moment resonates and it was a painting by Bedford called 'Wurlurrji'.[85] *Standing in front of us were two enclosed circular shapes bounded by a frame. Oliver jokingly referred to the work as Goowoomji's sunglasses.*

Oliver's statement summarises the extent to which people continue to sublimate Aboriginal art according to Western aesthetics. A repeated refrain in my text is that this interpretation reinforces the retinal Gestalt reading at the expense of the materiality and the horizontal process. The dilemma in writing on Aboriginal art lies in the use of a model of representation to analyse the paintings. There is a world of difference, as Bois wrote, between 'representing an action and fulfilling it'.[86]

I claim that this model is inappropriate and have cited Bataille's concept of horizontality to explain and support this claim. In the final section of this chapter, I will argue the case that Bedford's paintings—particularly the gouache on paper and crescent board—are theoretical, and critique Western categories of art and notions of vision. I will further investigate Cavells's concept of 'automatism' and discuss what convention Bedford is generating in his work through the technical support of horizontality. Like Kngwarreye, Bedford signalled a clear break from the tradition of what is usually identified as Aboriginal art.

Bedford, whose skin name is 'Jawalyi', is a Gija man born in the early 1920s at Bedford Downs Station in the East Kimberley. He worked as a stockman and, after many years on various stations, retired to live at Warmun Aboriginal community at Turkey Creek. Oliver's introductory text to Bedford's retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, in 2007, stated:

> To me, Paddy's paintings have always been self portraits, in which his spirit, physicality and identity are embedded as much in canvas as in the land that shaped him. Those wonderfully awkward and abstract rock shapes which he rearranges like pieces on a chessboard to represent places are also himself.[87]

Putting aside the poetics of the writing, there are some key indicators in this passage that need to be addressed because Oliver worked closely with Bedford. One can immediately hear Oliver's contextualisation of the work into a Western aesthetic, placing it into a category of self-portraits or landscapes. I do not adhere to this terminology, or to the equally problematic terms 'abstract' and 'representation'. Meanwhile, Oliver raises the seemingly innocent concept of a chessboard without any idea that it is a game played horizontally, and is thus a loaded term in the context of Bedford's art.

I expand this idea by discussing a number of paintings entitled *Red Pocket* that Bedford visited time and time again over a period of six years, from 1998 to 2004. Playing by the rules, he engaged in a paradigmatic system that enabled each work to operate differently, so that we are caught negotiating a 'network of differences'.[88] *Red Pocket* was painted 11 times; however, each painting presents the viewer with another set of problems.

With *Red Pocket*, it is evident that each painting looks different in its colour design by following a certain formula, beginning with its support size (122 cm x 135 cm), and involving colour contrasts (red, black and white ochres, and, later, grey), well-defined shapes (rectangles, circles, triangles and crosses), and a lateral compression that results from the contrasts. However, each one operates differently. When a move is exhausted, another match is played with an entirely different outcome, as in a game of chess. Bedford is rearranging the sign, which shifts from the symbol to index. Bedford's system is fully demonstrated in the gouaches from 2003 onwards.

I do not see this as a development in Bedford's practice, as others do. I observe in Bedford a sustained interest in a particular Dreaming (*Red Pocket*), in which he repeatedly investigates its different roles and functions. Whether a painting was made in 1998 or 2006 is irrelevant in terms of progress. What is relevant is the how *Red Pocket* enables an operation to be repeated and unfolded into the present.

The first recorded *Red Pocket* painting is dated 1998 (ochres and pigment with acrylic binder on Belgian linen, 122 cm x 135 cm, Paddy Bedford Trust) (Fig. 18). Immediately, one is aware of the large scale and non-natural pigments and binder. The support is archival (linen) and the size is one that is dear to modernism. Clearly intended for the market is the matte colour pigment that imitates ochres, with ceramic grog thrown in to good effect. This radical change in support, scale and pigment enabled Bedford to develop a consistency that would last for his entire practice. The 300 or so paintings that he produced on linen all conformed to one of two sizes—122 cm x 135 cm or 122 cm x 180 cm. After becoming accustomed to this scale, Bedford was fully aware of the potential and limitations of the support in a Western sense. Let us examine a number of *Red Pockets* to determine how they operate and how this enabled Bedford to 'just paint'.[89] All the images are cited from the Museum of Contemporary Art catalogue titled, 'Paddy Bedford'.

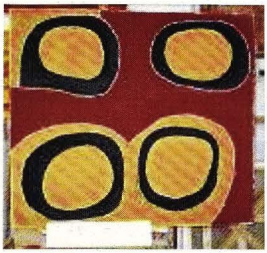

Fig. 18. Paddy Bedford, *Red Bucket (Red Pocket)*

In *Red Bucket,* (1998, catalogue 16) (Fig. 18), Bedford positions the yellow ochre at the top left corner to occupy two planes at the same time, operating as both a figure and a ground, as in Jampinji's and Peters's works. The red ochre surrounds the four contrasting shapes to hold them in the rectangular support. The shape at the top right is defined by red ochre, and sits within the frame, while the other two shapes are joined at the bottom by yellow ochre. This stabilising device declares a right way up, as opposed to the top left, where the shape is constantly shifting. As the viewer circulates around the support, attempting to resolve the ambiguity of figure and ground, the two contrasting shapes held within yellow ochre at the bottom cement one's feet to the ground.

Fig. 19. Paddy Bedford, *Red Bucket (Red Pocket)*

Red Pocket, 1999 (catalogue 41) (Fig. 19) is reduced to black and white, with all four black shapes moving in and across from the framing edge. The four large shapes at the corners are incomplete, and apparently continue beyond the framing edge of the support. One small black circular shape is defined by the surrounding white, and attention is drawn to this shape through its centrality and stability. This and other black and white works of 1999 contain white dotted lines that surround black shapes enhancing a figure/ground shift. Without this, the works are flatter and the movement is decreased, except for the small circle, which would jump alone, creating an imbalance.

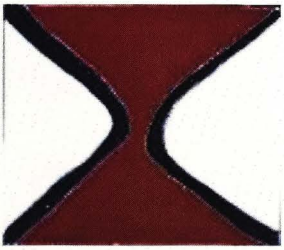

Fig. 20. Paddy Bedford, *Red Pocket*

Red Pocket, 2000 (catalogue 77) (Fig. 20) is a radical and simple symmetrical design of four triangles in red and white, with a dramatic use of black operating as line, but also creating a shape in itself. The red operates as both ground and figure as the white shapes come in from the framing edge. A verticality emerges in this painting, but it is a false hope that soon vanishes in a vertiginous fall that forces the ground to rush up and reassert itself. The same operation would occur if the painting was turned on a 90 degree axis, in which the white triangles would become the figure.

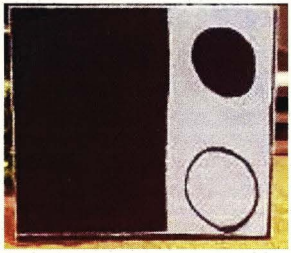

Fig. 21. Paddy Bedford, *Red Pocket*

Red Pocket, 2001 (catalogue 119) (Fig. 21) introduces grey—a prepared mix of black and white. Bedford now increases the tension by making a black rectangle and black circle operate as figure and ground, simultaneously. Whereas the black circular shape is both figure and ground, the grey circle, with its black contour, can be read either as a grey circle on a black ground, or a grey plane cut by a black line. This ambiguity is further enhanced by the dominant left half of the canvas—an encroaching black shape that compresses the grey at the vertical line of dots that separate them. Grey operates in an interesting way with black because it partakes of it, and in this canvas it goes beneath the black and re-emerges in the grey circle. At no point is grey operating as depth in the Western sense of being atmospheric or transparent.

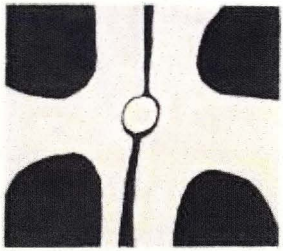

Fig. 22. Paddy Bedford, *Red Pocket*

In *Red Pocket*, 2002 (catalogue 133) (Fig. 22), Bedford revisits *Red Pocket* (Fig. 18), as four shapes come in from the four corners of the framing edge. The work contains another circle, which can be read as a pink figure or black cut. However, as one steps back, this circle marks the centre of the canvas and thus must be read as a place of high significance.

In each of the *Red Pocket* paintings, Bedford acknowledges the pocket of red earth. However, he does so from different points of entry, enabling a potentially endless series that is nevertheless restricted by the rules. 'Pocket' is the perfect name for both the real place and the paintings, as the word conjures both flatness and depth.

PA: *I remember standing at Piltardi looking down at the rockhole when Nganyinytja pointed to where she was standing on a rock. As she moved away from the spot, there were two footprints embedded in the rock.*

In the West Kimberley, dinosaur footprints remained embedded in the rocks when animals walked over the mud-covered bogs. Negative impressions were made, casting a footprint that hardened over time into solid rock. Marking the spot, these prints, which can be understood as indexical signs, have been left by the movement of time and geological forces. The *Red Pocket* series alludes to the red ochre mined directly from geological deposits at Jiljin by Aboriginal people.[90] The red ochre for Bedford is a footprint of another kind that relates to his Dreaming. It is important that this is the basic material for paintings. If the red ochre were drawn from the earth deposits (as in Thomas's paintings), these paintings would be truly indexical signs. Even though Bedford used readymade pigments, for him, they are always the site of Jiljin.

In academic discussions of this art, critics have raised comparisons with surrealists such as Arp or Miró, because of having their images in mind. For me, a more relevant comparison can be made with Dubuffet, who wrote 'look at your palette and rags', and

exhorted the viewer to consider the painted surface as a ground viewed from above, and whose painting *Olympia* (1950) compresses the material to the support as if flattened by a steam roller.

PA: *I remembered when Bedford came to Darwin with the Jirrawun Artists at my invitation. During this time, he painted Camel Gap, 2001, a 1.8 metre high canvas in black and white. The vertical grey smear in the middle of this work was an accident that Bedford tried to remove. It was recommended that he leave this smear as a mark, a trace of the process. Subsequently, beginning with Camel Gap in 2002, the smearing became a deliberate mixing of pigment, culminating in Mad Cap 2005. Unfortunately, with this mix, a Western landscape enters the work and we see a red sky above hills. The market rewards these paintings because of the instant recognition of landscape.*

Fig. 23. Paddy Bedford, *Red Pocket*

Red Pocket 2005 (catalogue 200) (Fig. 23) is very distant from the *Red Pocket* paintings discussed above because it introduces *tone*, which brings distance and the illusion of depth, and elevates it to the vertical Western genre of landscape. Bedford lost sight of the medium of horizontality—the medium that supported his practice. As if Bedford were no longer singing country but responding to external demands from the art market. No longer is the painting process a residue of an event; instead, it has been contaminated by image. By mixing pigment on the canvas to produce tone, he introduced depth, and denied materiality (mud). One needs the ochre materials to feel the ground, to feel embedded in the process. Now there is atmosphere (skies), and that leads to sublimation. Although Bedford lost sight of his medium between 2005 and 2006, he was able to recapture it in his gouaches, where there was apparently less intervention from outside sources.

There are two distinct elements that characterise the gouaches: coloured shapes and coloured lines. For the purpose of this argument, I limit myself to a discussion of red, black and white gouaches with lines, which are, in effect, drawings. Often a paring back

to drawing occurs towards the end of an artist's life—a simplification via drawing that represents a radical departure, a new beginning (such as with Pollock). Logically, drawing is horizontal (while painting is vertical) because one draws on a horizontal surface. Walter Benjamin implied this in his famous statement:

> One could speak of two sections of the world's substance: the longitudinal section of painting and the transverse section of some drawings. The longitudinal section seems to be representative; it somehow contains things; the transverse section is symbolic, it contains signs.[91]

In other words, whereas painting is an *illusion* of the real world, the horizontal support asserts itself as real, and the mark on it as material. I am reminded of Bedford sitting on a milk crate at Frances Kofod's place, extending his arm out and across the table where the paper or crescent board was in front of him. Bedford stated, 'I have painted mother's and father's country. Now, I am just painting'.[92] The statement, 'I am just painting' indicates an action, not a referent (of his mother and father's country). The performance is located in the reference to himself—the 'I'.

When Bedford was making his gouaches at this table, he was experiencing the shapes that inhabit his country. Thus, his gesture was not a metaphor (it did not represent); instead, it was performative. Bedford's mark made something happen—it caused the referent (the country/himself) to rise to the surface and declare 'here I am'.

'Here I am' reminds me of Serra's *Tearing Lead*, 1969, discussed in Chapter 1. Strips of torn lead were left to lie on the floor as an indexical trace of the process. He finally arrived at form 'through drawing understood as a continuous process of exposure'.[93] When Bedford was drawing, his movement was fluid and involved his body, and the marks (loops, circles and lines in red on black) were like strands of the ancestral Law pulled up from inside country. By retracing their passage through repeated drawing, his mark became a continuous process of exposure that was performative and in the present tense.

Throughout this text, I have referred to the horizontal 'matrix', using the term that Krauss took from Francois Lyotard, who referred to, 'A matrix, by which he means an order that operates beyond the reach of the visible, an order that works entirely underground, out of sight'.[94] The horizontal matrix that operates below vision is important to analyse, as writers about Bedford speak of what is hidden in the depths of his work—a space we cannot see. I would argue that the activity that collapses good form is not only visible, but is there to be experienced. What is this activity, and what are the set of conventions it generates? In other words, what is the automation in these gouaches?

With the *Red Pocket* paintings, Bedford was in the act of rearranging shapes. However, in the gouaches—when he was drawing on a black ground—the shapes give way to linear tracks. Gone are the abrupt contrast and lateral compression of the earlier works. The gouaches are effectively multiple variations on a theme. Krauss's explanation of variation is apt:

> It becomes a declaration of the energies of the invention of its author, of the continual upsurge within his imagination of ever new ways of conceiving the original idea, no matter how powerful. A warrant of a fund of originality that repetition, the outpouring of the controlled play of differences, wholly unlike the empty recurrence of the media forms.[95]

This description evokes Bedford's practice perfectly because the new confidence he experienced in the final years is reflected in the work. The process of theme and variation enables thought and invention to take place; it is the epistemological moment when that which is practical becomes theoretical in itself. Bedford created a theoretical object that cannot be accommodated by the received history of art, and must be taken as a critique on Western vision.

Oliver recorded the date and number sequence of Bedford's work. The sequence of seven works on crescent board (index of works-gouaches, catalogue 2004, 195–201) (Fig. 24) clearly demonstrates Bedford working through a theme with variations. His approach was reproductive—not unlike a machine.

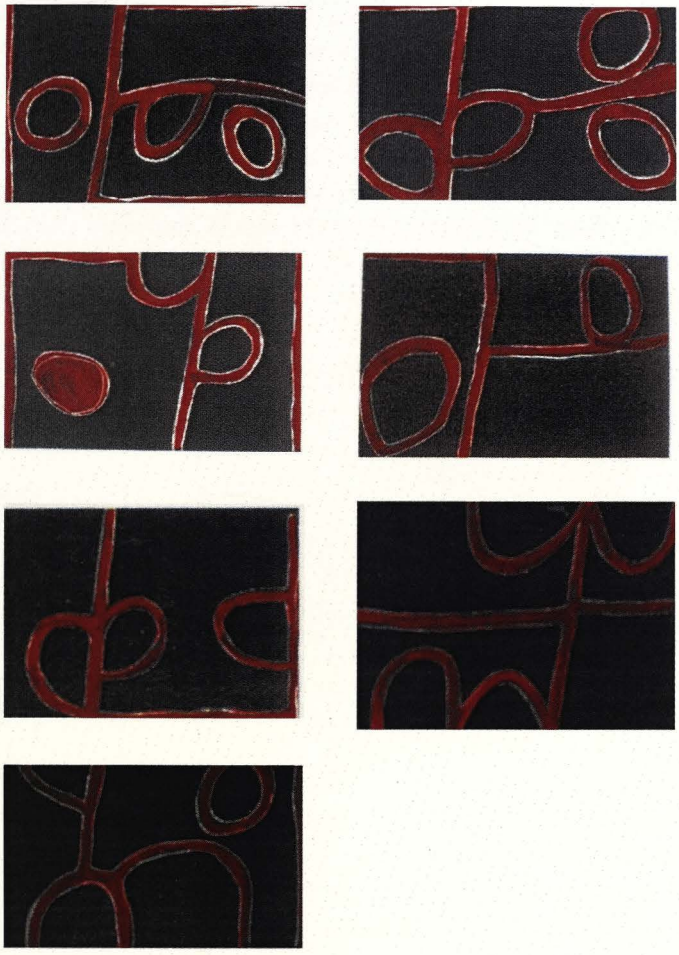

Fig. 24. Paddy Bedford, *Untitled (sequence 195–201)*

I deliberately use the word 'reproductive' because some writers describe Bedford's work in terms of its sensuality and sexuality, sublimating image onto his work. For example, Georges Petitjean described it as having 'phallic connotations' and 'feminine forms'.[96] My emphasis is not on sublimation, but process—the reproduction of the action, of moving from one gouache to another, of creating a rhythm or beat.

Each drawing on crescent board responds to the one before. A transparent red line reveals the black ground underneath, while this same line creates an edge that is traced by white pastel. The red is suspended between what lies underneath (the black membrane that allows an upsurge or rising) and the white line on top that holds it in place. This gesture is repositioned in the response lines at the borders that disappear over the edge, and by circles migrating, and so on. One recognises the shift of direction, but can connect to what went before. As we watch the process continue through the series, we are aware of the present tense. One can observe in the photograph (Fig. 25) at Kofod's house that, as each gesture is completed, the board is pushed to one side, culminating in a stack of boards layering each other on the table. The motion is direct, bold and fast, like a flicker in an animated slow motion film of his country.

Fig. 25. Paddy Bedford

The gesture in motion, giving rise to a recursive action in the gouaches, makes them, as Patrick Hutchings stated, 'elastic, full of animation'.[97] This action refers to the title of the series, containing its transitive verb (*Walking the Line*). Furthermore, the character of the line generates a new set of instances in which the gesture in motion becomes a new automatism—drawing for animation. Bedford was animating his country.

This is Bedford's tract. 'Tract' comes from The Latin word *tractus*, meaning drawing or dragging in the sense of a duration of time.[98] (It can also mean a drawn line, alluding to its continuous and unbroken quality). Each gouache creates a beat that is repeated in the next, which is then connected to the group as a whole, evoking time as duration. Sequence becomes a continuous, unbroken loop. This induces meaning, but does not represent it, as a repeating beat connects us to the ground in real time. The viewers' awareness of the beat is not optical; it is felt in the body. I maintain that this pulse (a body pulse) is the gap or shift between the horizontal and vertical that directs the viewer

away from image to the process—to the mechanical action of drawing country for animation.

In conclusion, Bedford's work is often discussed in relation to jazz. However, actually, Bedford's improvisation lies in what the elements do within the conventions of drawing. As Cavell explained:

> In mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them one's work is assured of a place in that tradition.[99]

Not only is the automatism placed in Bedford's tradition (drawing in sand and caves and body painting), it travels beyond the frame of picturing to a ground that is shared with horizontality, and that enables a cross-cultural dialogue.

Conclusion

> When people are confronted with experiences that are new, instead of accepting them as such, they try to relate them back to secure knowledge. By denying the new they not only deprive themselves of its experience but contribute to a basic misunderstanding of development in art. Everything is seen in the lineage of ... breaks and disjunctions are not allowed for.[100]
>
> Serra, 1988

Thanks to several decades of the critical writings of Krauss and Bois, there has been a rethink of the central critique of twentieth century painting as a model of representation. Krauss's writing on Pollock raised the importance of the horizontal position of the canvas—that is, as a surface to be acted upon. As discussed earlier, this horizontality undermined verticality—the premise of all image-making—and ultimately questioned the conventions of painting and representation.

My self-awareness as a painter over the last 25 years has been influenced by those critical writings, and has also coincided with a time in which Aboriginal painting has made its presence felt in Australia. Unlike much postmodern art of recent decades, my argument is not concerned with contemporary theory, but with the serious question of the received history of painting. Along with Pollock, Serra, Ryman and others, I believe in the necessity of reinventing the medium, and, in so doing, investigating the fundamentals of its deep structure—namely, its horizontality. For me, this approach enables a way forward in abstraction. I agree with Bois that the twenty-first century is not an end of abstract painting, but a beginning—as the fruitful and ongoing careers of Serra and Ryman bear witness.

The analysis of Aboriginal art has inevitably evolved through anthropological studies, rather than through the domain of art criticism. As a result, the focus tends to be on representational elements and not on the material quality, process, or operation on the viewer. As a painter, I seek to redress that imbalance. With the introduction of Western supports, tools and acrylic paint at Papunya Tula in the 1970s, the dialogue and collaboration with Western art had begun. Those non-mimetic qualities of painting do not change through the centuries or across cultures. All artists have to consider the limitations of the geometric support and stretched canvas or linen as a ground for the application of paint. In other words, Aboriginal artists share this domain with Western artists.

From decades of observation, we know that the orientation of the work is horizontal because the work can be viewed from all four sides and has no right way up. When this art leaves the community and goes to a gallery for an exhibition, it is hung vertically (that is, it becomes a commodity). Subsequently, the aesthetic quality for the viewer is that the painting has a correct way up. This elevation to the wall creates a spectacle of the painting.

The striking visual effect of a central desert painting is undeniable and is felt by all viewers. However, the process of how this was achieved is rarely—if ever—discussed, in the interests of discerning a representational image. However, as I have shown in my analysis of the work of Kngwarreye, Bedford and others, the layering of paint on a horizontal surface creates an operation in the work when lifted to the vertical. When experienced by the viewer, this operation is located in the horizontal matrix, where the paint is applied in a lateral movement across its surface. The quality of the paint, in terms of its viscosity, enables both opacity and transparency to behave in such a manner to either reveal or hide what lies underneath, through the process of layering. Colour is activated by what lies beside it to push the painting surface forward towards the viewer's space—not like representational painting, where it is a view to a space behind. This is what Aboriginal art painting shares with Pollock's drip painting.

The problem lies with language, or the lack of it. The formal analysis of twentieth century modernism stops short of analysing horizontality. The language must come from the process, not the current trend in which theoretical concepts (cultural and post-colonial) are used to analyse painting through its traditional support. This is the reason I have referred to artists such as Kngwarreye and Bedford as working within the medium of horizontality. It supports their practice because of its connection to ground through singing and dancing.

This reminds me of a conference called 'Wijay Na' at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in 1996. The Yirrakala elder, Girawum Gumana, spoke in response to a number of concerns that I was attempting to address. He commented that most 'white fellas' who paint are copycats (using representation). However, he went on to say that he painted for knowledge—that painting comes first, language comes after. Gumana was referring, of course, to the fact that language comes from the process of painting; it does not precede it.

This was not the first time I had heard this. In 1990, Nganyinytja spoke at William Mora Galleries in Melbourne about my exhibition, *Open Country*. This exhibition was a response to Nganyinytja's invitation to paint her country. She often spoke about 'two

ways', referring to a dialogue between cultures. She always maintained that two cultures must stand strong together, but not trespass on each other's laws. She would often say that it is in your stories and history and through this invitation to paint that we can find ways for dialogue, and create a language. Her response at the gallery was a concise description of what was operating in each work, according to Tjukurrpa.

In 1998, a Yirrakala elder and painter, Djalu Gurruwiwi, at the Australian Print Project, drew rarrk lines into a plate that I was etching, creating a mutual image. This direct response on the same plate by Gurruwiwi enabled a dialogue and was acknowledged as such at the same time. Gurruwiwi showed, at length, a suite of my etchings to a visiting elder from his community. The lengthy discussion that ensued was yet again proof that work gives rise to language.

In 2000, Peters and I painted *Two Laws* at Humpty Doo. At the end of each day, a painting would be propped against the wall and we would discuss this during dinner. On one particular night, Peters exclaimed that 'black can't do that'. Peters's comment was a response to the fact that, in my painting, black projected forward, rather than receded. It was not inert, but a material that asserted itself whenever something was laid beside it.

Many months later, I was invited to a meeting at Kununurra to discuss *Two Laws* with Jirrawun painter Peggy Patrick. The emphasis in this meeting was that the series that Peters and I had painted had created a space for a white man to be included. Patrick stated 'that a new language had been created' and that we needed time to think about the new way. Pointing to Bedford, she stated that he would remain in his time—the old way—because he was an older man. However, she believed that *Two Laws* had opened another way forward.

Peters and the other Aboriginal painters recognised that the horizontality of the work remained even when the work was lifted to the wall. They responded to a ground that contained marks arising from a process—a ground that is not provisional, but active, a material. It is not a ground in a Western sense (paint on canvas giving the illusion of space), but a ground that remains a material (paint). For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, horizontality is a site for process to be experienced.

In a recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, called *Origins of Western Desert Art, Tjukurrtjanu*, Fred Myers recalled Nancy Munn's explanation that the signs were not just iconographic in the sand/body/ritual decoration, but had an indexical relationship to the ancestral beings.[101] Myers furthered this by stating that 'the paintings in recent years are, surely, also performances themselves'.[102] Myers did not go far

enough, for he did not address the horizontal matrix. He understood the importance of the 'medium of ritual, involving song and movement', but stopped short of the ways in which this can create new conventions. Myers stated:

> In the singing associated with the Tingarri tradition, which has come to dominate Pintupi men's painting, a common melodic line indicates the travelling of the ancestral men. 'Kurrali kurrali yanana tirrima', they sing as they move from place to place, the movement indicated by straight lines or paths between circles ... The painted line and circle are also the objectification of the song, of the imagination engaged by the song.[103]

Myers seemed to understand the painting as a representation of the song (an external referent). I have argued that, in the case of Kngwarreye and Bedford, singing and painting are intrinsically linked, but in the horizontal process. In the act of painting, the indexes of ritual are formalised—line connects to song, giving rise to an embodied experience for the viewer. In the case of horizontality, a painted line has a job that is not the division within the frame, as is seen in Western art. Instead, it is a unifying job that goes beyond the frame to connect the viewer to the ground on which he or she stands—an experience of ground that will differ depending on the viewer's knowledge.

The literature ignores the understanding of the function that material and process play on a horizontal field—a function that enables the icon to enter at the level of the index. It not only gives rise to what lies below, but generates a new set of conventions. I cannot stress enough the implications of this for painters. In comparative analysis, marks are singled out because they look superficially similar. This results in a Tuckson painting being placed alongside a Kngwarreye. The gaze that does this is a picturing gaze; it ignores the deep structure of painting.

I have argued that another approach is warranted—one that may give rise to a connoisseurship of art through horizontality. A historical analysis of horizontality would begin to make informed judgements about what constitutes this medium and what conventions it generates. In other words, it will enable an art criticism. Such questions of fakes and collaboration between artists and art advisors will become obvious. In the horizontal practice, all the material remains as evidence. A new vocabulary to critique the conventions of Aboriginal art might come to supplant the cynicism of the collaborator or dealer and investor for whom the art is just a commodity.

Currently, galleries such as the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia place desert paintings on the floor, or on a 'plinth' (is it a sculpture now?) and do not acknowledge that it is destined for the wall. They fail to recognise that this axial

shift is part of the work. Not placing it on the wall denies the operational quality of the painting.

Bois explained Ryman's painting ground as one of material—one of 'those little things' that sustained his practice for over 50 years and enabled him to reinvent what is considered as a ground in painting. Bois concluded:

> In any paintings of his [Ryman's], strokes are brushed on a ground, but the painting itself cannot be said to be 'painted on' this or that ground. His work is the best approximation there is in painting of Borges's geographical fantasy of a map that would be equal in extension to the country it charts.[104]

Indeed, the paintings of Bedford and Kngwarreye could be said to create a ground that charts the country that is sung *beyond picturing*.

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Appendix 1: Approved Study Program for Thesis

Thesis Title: *Beyond Picturing*

Practice-led research to investigate whether horizontality can establish a new set of conventions to create a ground for cross-cultural dialogue that respects cultural differences.

Outline of Thesis

Horizontality as a methodology can be a vehicle for meaning based on the theories of structural linguistics and phenomenology. Historically, Western painting is viewed vertically as 'image'. The horizontal vector presents 'process'. Moving from one to the other produces an axial shift. The question I pose is: Can the horizontal vector enable a ground for cultural dialogue?

Research Questions

1. Can horizontality—the ground being a material surface—become an object of discourse, not of picturing? Can the logic be gerundive—that is, can the work unfold in the present, open to the future and create a ground for a cross-cultural dialogue? The thesis will clarify a critical position: that some people confuse meaning with the referent and fail to see that the material surface—that which I call the 'signifier' (because painting is a language)—is not a transparent gateway to meaning, but signifies meaning in its own right.

2. Does the operation of the *formless* create a support for practice? Does the horizontal matrix of this structure enable a new set of conventions for such a cross-cultural dialogue? Does this correct the received history of modern art, in which current discourse splits form and content, requiring artists and writers to address cultural and political realities in their art based on representation? Does this correction create a model of critical analysis based on horizontality not only for Western abstraction, but also Aboriginal art? Does this correction suggest that Aboriginal art can be a theoretical object that challenges the categories of the Western art canon?

3. If horizontality disrupts and challenges the conventions of picturing, what role does black play in this game? Does it shift from being a metaphor to a substance in which

black becomes a material? Does the architectural space of the labyrinth provide the place for this game?

Three Main Arguments

My thesis has required a number of strategies that argue a re-thinking of how we approach critique and art writing about painting when looking at a cross-cultural dialogue. Cultural knowledge, difference and sensitivities must be respected. However, if painting is a language, then the material surface signifies in its own right.

1. In my research, I will define **abstraction** and the operation of Bataille's 'formless' with an emphasis on horizontality as a possible medium for cross-cultural dialogue. Meaning is not just based on formal qualities of representation, but is also based on *making* as an operational process in which the residue of the event remains as meaning. Steinberg suggested that the flatbed picture plane or horizontal worked surface enables a criterion that cuts across the terms 'abstract' and 'representational', 'pop' and 'modernist'.

2. **Horizontality**: in *The Crisis of the Easel Picture*, Krauss discussed the lowering of material, process and ideas to the matrix of the floor—to the horizontal. In doing so, she argued, this axial shift can establish a new set of conventions. Therefore, my literature review will research whether this axial shift could also shift the ground of picturing to that of discourse and negotiation. This shift, I will argue, enables a dialogue with some Aboriginal painting that is *beyond picturing*.

3. **Medium**: It is not the material that defines a medium (for example, oil paint), but rather the **concept—that which supports it**. As Varnedoe concluded, Serra's work may not be about the medium of sculpture, but the concept that drives it—that is, balance. The convention generated through the medium of horizontality lies in the process of making the work. That is, the transitive verb (such as layering and folding) establishes the rules and is critiqued by those rules. I will further argue that lowering the work to the horizontal matrix can create a medium in which meaning lies in the operational process. The operation causes a displacement that re-categorises the medium.

Context

In the field of art in recent decades there has been a reassessment of the history of modernism/abstraction based on the theories of structural linguistics and phenomenology. Prior to this, abstraction was viewed as a style and thought to be mostly decorative and image based. It is important to clearly understand abstraction and meaning. I think that the recent strategy of appropriation is based on the assumption that abstraction is meaningless (empty formalism)—a belief that is frequently stated as the cause of the incompatibility between Aboriginal painting and Western abstraction. How often have we read or heard that, unlike Western abstraction, Aboriginal paintings have meaning? This is a strange assertion given that, currently, some Aboriginal art is marketed as 'decorative', by which some mean 'abstract' and 'anthropological'.

Current opinion and literature falls into two possible camps: either it cannot be compared to Western abstraction because the latter has no stories, or it is just another form of abstraction as pattern making. The position I wish to argue is that Aboriginal art challenges and delivers a correction in the way one views modern art. The current systems of classification will not help us look at a painting by Emily Kame Kngwarreye as a 'theoretical object'. Therefore, a reassessment is required. This rethink, I will argue, lies in a shared ground of horizontality.

From the literature that surrounds the late Kngwarreye and deals with her art as a form of abstraction, it has become apparent that some may have forgotten how to look at abstraction. When looking at Kngwarreye and the Kimberley painters, one can see the shift in spatial orientation; it can be viewed vertically as image, or horizontally as process.

Methodology

I will review the literature to date on the sign as a 'shifter', including Picasso's paper collages and their process of signification, and Rauschenberg's 'combines', in which the sign lies in its operational process. I will also discuss Pollock's paintings in relation to the process of signification that opens meaning to a slippage (operation of the formless) that ultimately unfolds and operates in the present. My research will investigate how meaning is not necessarily based on picturing alone, but that horizontality as an operational process can also be a site for meaning.

This analysis will help examine the literature surrounding Kngwarreye's *Yam Dreaming*, in which the axial shift—horizontal to vertical—is beyond picturing. Furthermore, I will continue to argue that the *appliqué* of paint is a basis for this meaning, not the *appliqué* of interpretation. I argue that conceptual metaphors reduce painting to illustration. Therefore, my method of analysis is to return to seriously examining painting—an activity that engages one in how the work is made. This will be done to investigate what the work is 'doing', what is 'operating', and whether the sign is slipping or collapsing.

The process of viewing is by getting up close and 'in touch' with the work—seeing how it is made in order to reveal both material and process as a source for meaning. I will present examples of work for theoretical discussion on horizontality. Taking these examples, I will argue a case for a shift from the vertical pictorial field of opticality (Gombrich's matching) to the horizontal (Steinberg's making), where the process lies in the field as a residue. I will develop a case to discuss the importance of this shift in the practices of Kngwarreye and Paddy Bedford, and will ask whether the vector that receives the material and process can generate a new set of conventions for critique.

I will research the materiality of 'black', such as in Serra's 'Notes on Drawing', Kngwarreye's black ground of substance, and Bedford's game with black. I will compare the quality of material and discuss sameness and difference in relation to painting, where the operation of black is contingent upon the manipulation of other structural qualities. The negation of a presumed opposition between black and white, figure/ground, is the result of its horizontality. This also relates to how the paint is received, how the material is treated, the edge of canvas and the edge of planes. It relates to how hard and soft edges meet (such as the use of dotting around contours), causing the black to bend and convulse and hover in a space that we are unable to identify as either figure or ground, receding or projecting. The investigation will analyse how black creates an interplay between the canvas and its environment—the wall—and

how the absence or presence of black acts to undermine the notion of paintings as infinite or contained. Black does not represent; it has a job to do. This history of black, once seen as a metaphor, now shifts from symbol to index through the horizontal process of Aboriginal art.

Through the literature, I will develop a sound argument that clearly demonstrates that painting signifies in its own right—that painting is a language and that the material surface is the signifier. The mode of inquiry, as before, is to compare, differentiate and clarify the similarities and differences between artists, such as Pollock and Kngwarreye, Tuckson and Gurruwiwi, and Thomas and Bedford.

Conclusion

The conclusion will draw on the theoretical position that horizontality can be a medium whereby a cross-cultural dialogue is possible—not through picturing, but through process.

Endnotes

Introduction

[1] Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontation with Twentieth Century Art* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1972), 84–90.

Chapter 1: Horizontality

[2] 'Formless': A term used by Bataille to describe the 'job' or operation of a work towards the low. Bataille created a dictionary of terms in *Documents* to explain this lowering towards declassification. 'Horizontality' was one such term.

[3] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of The Skin* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 30. This refers to David Levin's Decline and Fall Ocularcentricism in Heidegger's Reading of the History of Metaphyics, in Levin: 203.

[4] David Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 18.

[5] Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: October Books, MIT Press, 2010), 122.

[6] Ibid.: 173.

[7] Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: A Zone Book, 1997), 16.

[8] Jonathon Crary, *Suspensions of Perception, Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: October Books, MIT Press, 1999), 288.

[9] Judith Wechsler, *Cezanne in Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975), 138.

[10] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of The Skin* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005),16.

[11] Ibid.: 13.

[12] Claude Lefort, *Merleau-Ponty: The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134–146. Refer to pp. 254–257 working notes.

[13] Ibid.:146

[14] Richard Shiff, "Cezanne's Physicality, The Politics of Touch," in *The Language of Art History*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 131–133.

[15] Susan Sidlauskas, *Cezanne's Other, The Portraits of Hortense* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 2009), 107.

[16] Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 21.

[17] Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[18] Lisa Florman, "The Flattening of Collage," *October Journal* 102, Fall (2002): 84.

[19] Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 34.

[20] David Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 100.

[21] Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 97.

[22] Ibid.: 95.

[23] Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 293.

[24] Maja Mikula, *Key Concepts in Cultural Studies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 52.

[25] Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 97.

[26] Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontation with Twentieth Art* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1972), 84–90.

[27] Rosalind Krauss, "In Memory of Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)," *October Journal* 127, Winter (2009), 155

[28] Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 84.

[29] Ibid.: 90.

[30] Ibid.: 90.

[31] Rosalind Krauss, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in *Jackson Pollock, New Approaches*, ed. Karmel and Varnedoe (New York: MOMA, 1999), 173 and 168–171.

Chapter 2: Kngwarreye's Lesson in Horizontality

[32] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 193.

[33] Ibid.: 207.

[34] Ibid.: 193.

[35] Yves-Alain Bois: *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: October Books, MIT Press, 1993), Rosalind Krauss*: The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986)

[36] Mary Alice Lee, *Up and Down and Back and Across: A Review of the Abstract Paintings of Tony Tuckson in Relation to Aboriginal Art from Yirrkala*, unpublished text (2004).

[37] Rosalind Krauss, "Giacometti," in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. W. Rubens (New York: MOMA, 1984), 502.

[38] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand, Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 117.

[39] Rosalind Krauss, "Antivision," *October* 36, Spring (1986), 153.

[40] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) understood dialectic as a process of binary oppositions to achieve balance.

[41] Ibid.: 153

[42] Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 50.

[43] Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 150–151.

[44] Rosalind Krauss, "Preying on Primitivism," *Art and Text* 17 (April 1995), 59.

[45] Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," in *Theory and Philosophy of Art; Style, Artist and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 1–12.

[46] Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: October Books, MIT Press, 1993), 130.

[47] Ibid.: 136.

[48] I refer to the texts by Bois and Krauss. See *Painting as Model* for Bois's explanation of Mondrian's painted surface as a dynamic equilibrium. See *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture*, ed. Peter Fisher (New York: Scalo Publishers, 1999), 121. In this, Bois's essay on "Ryman's Lab" discusses the surface/ground experienced as material. Also see *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) for Krauss's essay on horizontality and the operation in Pollock's painting.

[49] Terry Smith, "Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter," in *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), 27–18.

[50] Ibid.: 28.

[51] Ibid.: 28.

[52] Ibid.: 28.

[53] Lee, *Up and Down and Back and Across* (2004).

[54] Mary Alice Lee, references *Closer to the Ground: A Reinterpretation of Walbiri Iconography*, Man, NS 19 (1984), 15–30.

[55] Diana James, "Kinship With Country" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2005), 29–31.

[56] Ibid.: 22.

[57] Ibid.: 42.

[58] Ibid.: 53.

[59] Smith, "Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter," in *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, 36.

[60] Catherine J. Ellis, *Aboriginal Music: Education for Living* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1985), 109.

[61] Ibid.: 109.

[62] James, *Kinship With Country*, 31.

[63] Ellis, *Aboriginal Music*, 82.

[64] Ibid.: 83.

[65] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed, Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 105.

[66] Ibid.: 107.

[67] Mary Alice Lee, *Up and Down and Back and Across* (2004).

[68] Erwin W. Straus, "Born To See, Bound to Behold: Reflections On The Function Of The Upright Posture In The Esthetic Attitude," in *The Philosophy of the Body Rejection of Cartesian Duality*, ed. S. Spicker (Chicago, Chicago Press, 1970), 7.

[69] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 109.

[70] Ian McLean, "Aboriginal Modernism in Central Australia," in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: Iniva and MIT Press, 2008), 79.

Chapter 3: Reading Bedford's Track/Tract

[71] Marc Glimcher, *Towards an Alternative Reality* (New York: Pace Publications, 1987), 67.

[72] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 109.

[73] Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 168.

[74] Frances Kofod, *Paddy Bedford* (Sydney: MCA, 2007), 136.

[75] Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 244.

[76] Bois, *Painting as Model*, 246–249.

[77] Ibid.: 247.

[78] Kim Akerman, *Paddy Jaminji: 'I bin paint 'im first'* (Perth: Heytesbury, The Holmes a Court Gallery, 2005).

[79] Bois, *Painting as Model*, 254.

[80] Ibid.: 240.

[81] Tony Oliver, *Rhapsodies in Country* (Sydney: Grantpirrie Gallery, 2002).

[82] *Two Laws One Big Spirit* is a series of paintings that Rusty Peters and Peter Adsett painted during Easter 2000 at Humpty Doo in the Northern Territory.

[83] Bois, *Painting as Model*, 88.

[84] Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 198.

[85] Russel Storer, *Paddy Bedford,* MCA, Sydney, Cat. no.28 PB 1998.28. (2007), 145.

[86] Bois, *Painting as Model*, 182.

[87] Tony Oliver, *Paddy Bedford* (Sydney: MCA, 2007), 9.

[88] Bois, *Painting as Model*, 91.

[89] Oliver, *Paddy Bedford*, 9.

[90] Frances Kofod, *Paddy Bedford* (Sydney: MCA, 2007), 134.

[91] Ibid.: 179.

[92] Michiel Dolke, *Paddy Bedford* (Sydney: MCA, 2007), 25.

[93] Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 244.

[94] Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 217.

[95] Ibid.: 225.

[96] Georges Petitjean, *Significant Paintings* (Sydney: Grantpirrie Gallery, 2002).

[97] Patrick Hutchings, *Paddy Bedford, Crossing Frontiers* (Utrecht: Snoeck Publishers, 2010), 46.

[98] Judy Pearsnall (ed), *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1518.

[99] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 104.

Conclusion

[100] Richard Serra, "Notes on Drawing," in *Richard Serra*, ed. E. G. Guse (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 68.

[101] Fred Myers, *Origins of Western Art Tjukurrtjanu*, ed. Judith Ryan and Philip Batty (Melbourne: Council of Trustees, National Gallery of Victoria, 2011), 32.

[102] Ibid.: 32.

[103] Ibid.: 33.

[104] Yves-Alain Bois, "Ryman's Lab," in *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture*, ed. Peter Fisher (New York: Scalo Publishers, 1999), 121.